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RICHARD BRINSLEY SHERIDAN

MICHAEL T. H. SADLER

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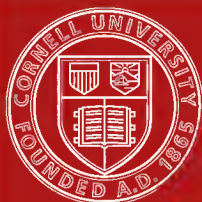
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THE POLITICAL CAREER
OF
RICHARD BRINSLEY SHERIDAN

THE POLITICAL CAREER OF RICHARD BRINSLEY SHERIDAN

(THE STANHOPE ESSAY FOR 1912). FOLLOWED BY SOME
HITHERTO UNPUBLISHED LETTERS OF MRS. SHERIDAN.
BY MICHAEL T. H. SADLER (BALLIOL COLLEGE)

OXFORD: PUBLISHED BY B. H. BLACKWELL,
50 & 51 BROAD STREET, AND MAY BE HAD OF
SIMPKIN, MARSHALL & CO., LONDON, MCMXII

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AUTHOR'S NOTE.

With the exception of Appendix III, the following Essay is substantially the same as that which gained the Stanhope Prize. The letters from Mrs. Sheridan to Mrs. Canning were most kindly lent me by Mrs. A. J. Butler, of Weybridge. I would take this opportunity of thanking her for her permission to reproduce them.

M. T. H. S.

Weybridge, 1912.

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"Sheridan became great, as it were, by stealth. He sauntered into notice and glided into fame. He stole into the affections of men and women by a wizardry of his own. . . . Through the changeful scenes of his earlier political life, he is felt like some noiseless presence prompting the chief actors, and in one episode actually directing the stage. He lurks unseen till the moment is ripe—a moment often deferred by himself. His power seldom disappoints, often surprises. The knight of the free-lance enters the lists at the eleventh hour, bows to the queen of beauty, charges redoubtable heroes, tilts at bewitched quintains, and in every tournament carries away the prize. In vain does envy outstrip admiration. He owns the talisman of personal magnetism, and often as the courtiers turn on their heel—their wont when genius blocks the way—he calmly pursues the zig-zag of his path with an inscrutable smile that wins them back again. But the plaudits die away. Without an audience he broods and pines. He waits, drowning reflection, draining bumper on bumper to the past which he vows to retrieve. A fresh bugle-call dispels his apathy. He starts eager from his cups, charges new enemies and gathers fresh laurels. Once more he feels invincible, till, too often the world's dupe and his own, disillusioned though never soured, battered by disease, intemperance and distresses, he sinks at length into a neglected death-bed, but an honoured grave."

SHERIDAN, by Walter Sichel, i. 113.

The Political Career of Richard Brinsley Sheridan.

INTRODUCTION.

SHERIDAN as a politician has only recently been rescued from an undeserved oblivion, and, as often happens after such tardy vindications, the danger is no longer one of under-praising, but rather of exaggerating his virtues and importance. The reaction is a natural one, but although contemporaries slandered him, although Moore misrepresented and plagiarised him, although his name seldom appears in those memoirs of the period which were published during the earlier part of last century, except in the capacity of whipping-boy for some other reputation, it is essential that the modern biographer should avoid the mistake of depicting him as a persecuted saint. There was little of the saint about Sheridan. His buoyancy is stimulating, his humour delightful, his cheerfulness lovable, his misfortunes pathetic, but at the same time his vigour was partly vanity, his wit was often of the cruellest kind—the sarcasm that smiles—his eternal good humour would have been impossible to a man of really deep feeling, his tragedy was hastened by drink. He is the stage

Irishman, a creature of moods, glittering now with the gold of genius, now with the tinsel of mere display, now rising to heights of noble idealism, now a playmate of the beasts that perish, a medley of good and bad, of sublime and ridiculous, a veritable patchwork of a man.

His political career offers comparatively few striking events to hamper or, as the case may be, assist the student of temperament. His virtues and his vices alike kept him in opposition. His tastes and his talents were those of the attacking rhetorician rather than of the constructive administrator;¹ his principles, which meant all the world to him, were too liberal to appeal to the oligarchy of governing houses, too ideal to have much practical meaning for the masses they strove to benefit; his poverty, his irresponsibility, his apparent frivolity, his strange companions inspired no confidence in the breasts of his contemporaries. His life, therefore, is an almost unbroken struggle as one of the leaders of an ill-assorted minority, honey-combed with intrigue, pitted against an obstinate king and a country which was apathetic where it was not corrupt.

In the essay which follows, narrative has been omitted as far as consistent with a proper understanding of Sheridan himself. The section concerned with his relations with the Prince of Wales contains practically the only record of events, for it

¹ Sheridan speaks of the 'glories of opposition' (*Speeches*, I, 29), and though, during his brief spells of office, he gained a reputation for untiring industry, he was plainly more at his ease on the other side of the House. He also grew to shrink from the inevitable expenses of office. (Cf. *Sichel*, II, 318-19.)

was in the course of this connection that the chief happenings of his career took place. Such a framework of fact, slight though it is, may serve to bear the study of his views (judged by themselves and in relation to those of his contemporaries) and the brief appreciation of his powers as an orator which limits of space allow. In conclusion, an attempt has been made to suggest why a career, which opened with such brilliance and promise, closed dismally in obscurity and failure.

I.

SHERIDAN was born in 1751. His childhood was a pilgrimage from place to place in the wake of a shiftless father, pompously formal, chronically insolvent. Thomas Sheridan's financial instability meant a casual education for young Richard, and, despite a noble mother, his home never gave him a background. London, Dublin, London again, Harrow, France, Bath, an ever-shifting, uncertain existence, increased his natural restlessness, while his father's rapid fluctuations between affluence and penury taught him to regard money as a rare blessing, to be enjoyed when possible, and not to be hoarded against the next inevitable bankruptcy. But at the same time this Bohemian life widened his vision and quickened his brain. From early days he learnt to rely on himself and his own wits. His natural fluency, fired by his father's untiring efforts in the cause of rhetoric, soon broke out in writing, while his romantic disposition profited by a wide acquaintance to do him the best turn of his life, when it brought him under the spell of Elizabeth Linley. His love-story was characteristically tempestuous—a duel and an elopement, a desponding renunciation, another duel, a final flaming outburst

and marriage. Away from the graceful corruption of Bath, Sheridan and his girl-wife lived out their idyll in the solitudes of East Burnham.

When they joined the world once more, it was the theatrical world of the Linleys. Sheridan's mother had died when he was at school, and, with her, his chief tie with home. He drifted apart from his father and elder brother, and became one of his wife's family. Between 1773 and 1780 he rose high in the world of actors and authors, writing his chief plays, acquiring Drury Lane, always ready for fresh ventures, never counting the cost. The doors of Society opened to the charm of his wit and the beauty of his wife. He mixed with statesmen and great ladies. The world of politics fired his imagination. Flatterers urged him to enter Parliament, and in November, 1780, he had taken the fatal step and was Member for Stafford. He had exchanged the atmosphere of his inheritance for that of his environment, and, though he could not have known it, entered a game whose rules he had not learnt, whose rules, as will be seen, he was never to learn.

But though by nature unfitted for his new career, Sheridan was not wholly strange to politics. Before his election for Stafford he had been sub-chairman of the Westminster Association for Reform, a league which agitated for universal suffrage and annual Parliaments. It was on the League's business that he came into close contact with Fox, and in February, 1780, the two presided jointly over a mass meeting of the Association in Westminster Hall. Sheridan, therefore, had thrown in his lot definitely

with the Whigs, and, on winning his seat, joined their ranks as a matter of course. Pitt was with them on the question of Parliamentary reform, a strange union of ice and fire which soon gave way to bitter enmity.

With, so to speak, this prenatal influence towards Radicalism, Sheridan entered the political fight, and soon made his mark among Fox's supporters. It was some six years after his *début* that he plunged into an intrigue which was to last all his life, on which he was to found all his hopes, and which, more than anything else, was to prove the cause of his ruin. The alliance between the extreme Whigs and George, Prince of Wales, danced before Sheridan like a will-o'-the-wisp, ever luring him on with the fairness of its promise, never within his grasp, and finally leaving him to sink in the marsh whither it had led him. No prospect so tempting had ever offered to a baffled Opposition. On the one hand stood an unpopular king, surly and clumsily despotic, who by interference of a flagrantly unconstitutional kind had wrecked a ministry and set up in its place a mere boy without even a majority of the House at his back; on the other, a dashing Prince, affable, accomplished, liberal in idea and action, the victim of his father's stinginess. The very contrast would appeal to men so emotional as Fox, Burke and Sheridan. When to the force of contrast were added all the possibilities of political advantage to be gained by an alliance with the Prince against his father, and against the presumptuous stripling who pretended to rule the country, it is no

wonder that the Opposition lost their sense of proportion and failed to gauge the character of their patron. It is safe to say that, had the Prince been capable of feeling a spark of gratitude, of speaking a true word or thinking a noble thought, the intrigue would have won the day and carried Fox and his friends to victory in the teeth of the obstinate King and his servile courtiers. But the Prince was capable of none of these things. He was a rake, with a rake's selfishness and instability. Probably he understood the hopes of the Opposition well enough, and he was astute enough to give the desired impression of willingness to recognise their friendship, but he had neither the ambition nor the application to wage a political battle. He used the brains and energies of his supporters to win for him money, or mistresses, or whatever was the whim of the moment, and, his point gained, threw them aside.

It is only fair to add that the weaknesses of those supporters contributed to their failure. Their spirit lacked the great quality of their young opponent—balance. Pitt is not an attractive figure. He has none of the grandeur of Chatham to glorify his haughty sarcasm; he seldom assumes the glowing colours of fanaticism; his rare extremism is cold and calculated. But he remains the real statesman of the age. The immaturity of his early ministry, its pettiness and mean subterfuge cannot dim the tragic glories of his later life. Throughout his career he pitted self-control against passionate emotion. Against his silent sneer the turbulent

genius of the Opposition wasted itself in brilliant invective. Fox had not the power of discipline, and of this power, for the union of such varied apostles of freedom as made up his party, more than an ordinary share was required. In their relations with the Prince of Wales, as in everything else, the Whigs lost force by lack of unanimity.

Of all those who gave themselves to his service, none suffered so much as Sheridan from the indolence and final desertion of the Prince. Fox, behind all his passion, had a keen eye for the main chance, and, after the failure of his India Bill, shrank from risking everything at once. He had no intention of making the Prince supreme, but merely of using him as a stepping-stone to his own ambition. There was much less political opportunism in Sheridan's devotion. Held to the royal trifle by a strange mixture of real affection and vanity, he was too impulsive and unreflecting to scheme against a possible fall. His attitude was curious, and underwent more than one almost involuntary change. At the time of the first Regency crisis he seems to have regarded George as the 'Prince' in the Machiavelian sense, who would regenerate England, and who, brandishing the flaming sword of liberty, would lead the Whigs to conquest. But this vision of a Patriot King faded before disappointment and disillusionment. The disastrous recovery of George III, the frivolous debauchery of the heir-apparent shattered Sheridan's noble dreams. Carlton House became a social arena only, the Prince a convivial host with

the added lustre of royalty. In the third and last phase, the final struggle for political triumph, Sheridan saw in the Regent, on the one hand, a purely negative asset, invaluable for the thwarting of Grenville; on the other a last link between the society he had once adorned, but from which he now bade fair to disappear, and perhaps also a protection from the bailiffs, a passport to further credit. The ardour of his early ideals had been cooled by misfortune; his hopes stretched little beyond the defeat of the immediate enemy. Such, in outline, are the stages of Sheridan's connection with the Prince of Wales. Anticipation is inevitable because—and this was his misfortune—he outlived his party. It is now necessary to return and show by a recital of events how his friends gradually disappeared, and how growing isolation played a part in his decline.

The history of the Whig intrigue with the Prince of Wales really begins before the fall of the Coalition ministry. George III and Lord Temple raged at Fox's pledges, at his influence with the Prince, but hesitated to instal a new ministry with the upholding of royal miserliness as its main pretext. The King's part in the defeat of the India Bill was as much due to accumulated rancour from this earlier grievance as direct dislike of the Bill, for all that it was really directed against him and against his 'friends' in the person of Warren Hastings.

But opposition did not damp the ardour of the Whigs in cultivating the Prince of Wales, nor do their schemes appear to have been particularly

secret.¹ In 1787 the Prince was the centre of Parliamentary debate. His debts were the *casus disputandi*, but the enquiry touched deeper questions before it was over. The old arguments were revived—the inadequacy of his allowance, the national disgrace of a penniless heir-apparent, his filial duty and patriotism in refusing the offers of the Duke of Orleans to relieve his embarrassments. Pitt talked glibly of the necessary leave from His Majesty before such matters could be discussed, but it was for the blunt-spoken Rolle to hurl the real bomb-shell, by an open allusion to the reported marriage of the Prince and Mrs. Fitzherbert. Such a marriage, were it genuine, would disqualify the Prince as heir to the throne, the lady being a Papist. On the other hand, the Royal Marriage Act made the marriage of a prince under twenty-five, without the King's consent, null and void. The Opposition were in a dilemma. They must at all costs prevent the marriage from being recognised as binding, for a disqualified Prince was valueless as a political card. But at the same time, they dared not offend the Prince himself by branding him as a seducer and Mrs. Fitzherbert as dishonoured. Sheridan's speech of April 27th was only gaining time, and an effort to soothe the inopportune Rolle by an assurance of there being nothing to conceal. Three days later,

¹ In June, 1784, Orde writes to the Duke of Rutland with reference to the plans of the Opposition:—'Every exertion is put in practice to delude and disturb the minds of the people, and it is seriously to be apprehended that the true Junto—Fox, Fitzpatrick, Sheridan, &c.—will be restrained by no consideration of public safety in order to advance their private and general successes.' (*Hist. MSS. Com. Rutland MSS.*, Vol. III, p. 101.)

Fox in so many words denied the existence of any marriage whatever, and assured the House that he spoke with direct authority.

Here was a catastrophe indeed. The Prince sent for Grey and hysterically commanded him to get them out of the mess somehow. Grey suggested that, as his Royal Highness had been the cause of Fox's statement, and as this statement he now admitted to be untrue, it was for him to set matters right. The Prince wept, and then declared that Sheridan must do what he could. Accordingly, on May 4th, Sheridan undertook the ungrateful task. His speech was universally ridiculed—by the Government in their ignorance of the whole affair, by the Foxites in their anxiety to slur over Fox's initial foolishness. 'Sheridan,' writes Pulteney, 'attempted very foolishly to repair his statement respecting the marriage, by saying that Mrs. Fitzherbert's situation was truly respectable, at which everyone smiled.'¹ Lord Holland blames Sheridan for uttering 'unintelligible, sentimental trash about female delicacy, which implied the displeasure of the prince, but did not directly or even remotely, insinuate that what Mr. Fox had spoken was either beyond or without the authority of the Prince of Wales.'² And yet this same man would have been the first to blame Sheridan for treachery to Fox if he had in any way cast a slur on his leader's discretion.

The truth is that the dilemma was beyond tact. Fox's good faith or otherwise can only be established by inference from evidence, and by far the

¹ *Rutland MSS.*, III, 387. ² *Memoirs of the Whig Party*, II, 140.

most important piece of evidence, we possess is that Fox swore he had a document proving the non-existence of any marriage between the Prince and Mrs. Fitzherbert. After his death careful search was made for this document, but in vain. It is impossible to believe he could have destroyed it; one must infer that he was lying, and he was an expert liar. What happened was most probably this. The Prince told Fox to deny the existence of any *legal* marriage, and such a denial would have been true in some measure, seeing that the Marriage Act gave no sanction. Fox, blinded by political need, deliberately went further and denied that there was *any marriage whatever*. Sheridan, the troubadour idealist, came to the rescue. His attempt to set matters straight was certainly clumsy, but it is hard to see what else he could have done consistently with his friendship for the Prince, his loyalty to the reckless Fox, and his real sympathy for Mrs. Fitzherbert herself—a sentiment which does not, except superficially, seem to have touched the others. Indeed, Sheridan is the only chivalrous figure in the whole drama. The beauty and distress of the unfortunate lady touched his feelings, and the thought of the libels and broadsheets which were destroying her character in every print-shop and coffee-house angered him. To help this passive victim of a selfish prince and a tactless politician became in itself an object. There is no need to inquire here how far Mrs. Fitzherbert herself realised the possibility of her marriage being invalid. Her distress at this moment was genuine enough, and there is no reason to suppose that

Sheridan championed her cause from any other feeling than pity.

It has been suggested¹ that another motive for Sheridan's interference was to prevent a breach between Fox and the Prince. Certainly there could not have been a better opportunity for stealing a march on Fox, if the jealousy and treachery which the Hollands always attribute to Sheridan were really his. That no such intention appears may be taken as proof of his loyalty.

The whole matter ended in a settlement between Pitt and the Prince about the latter's debts, the original cause of the trouble, which were, despite Sheridan's passionate protest, to be defrayed largely out of public money. The Whigs had lost prestige, and only Mrs. Fitzherbert herself was grateful to Sheridan. It is now possible to give him credit for considerably mitigating the disaster, as well as for conduct which compares equally favourably with the interested credulity of Fox and the vacillation of the Prince, unable to choose between private and public ambition.

Only a year later the King's illness created a new situation, to the possibilities of which the Whigs were keenly alive. Sheridan was now closer in the Prince's counsels than Fox, and on him fell much of the negotiation of the intended Regency, which was to oust Pitt and instal the Whigs in office.² The

¹ *Sheridan*, by Walter Sichel (London, 1909), II, 115.

² For the intrigues which went on during the three months of George III's madness (Nov., 1788—Jan., 1789), there could be no more valuable authority than the diary of Georgiana, Duchess of

first duty of the Opposition was to prevent the acceptance of Pitt's Regency Bill, which contained sufficient restrictions on the patronage and prerogative powers of the Regent to make a change of ministry very difficult, if not impossible. Sheridan was indefatigable in his task of deciding just how far the Prince might accept the principle of restriction, without damaging his powers as Regent. That the Whigs should come in was the *sine quâ non*. The very ministry was made up. Fox, of course, would be First Lord of the Treasury and Secretary of State for the Foreign Department. Sheridan refused the Chancellorship of the Exchequer, which might easily have been his, because he wished to prove his worth first in a subordinate office, and worked hard to induce Lord John Cavendish, a harmless and respected relic of the Rockingham government, to take the post.¹

In Parliament, Sheridan played an equally important part. His speech of criticism on the Government proposals charged Pitt openly with intending to restrict the Regency for fear of losing office—an accusation which laid his party open to a very

Devonshire, published by Mr. Sichel at the end of the second volume of his life of Sheridan. The use of the abbreviation 'D. of D. Diary' in the following pages denotes a reference to this diary.

¹ Cf. *D. of D. Diary*. Sichel, II, 406, 408, 410. Also *Hist. MSS. Com. Charlemont Papers* (xii report, app. pt. viii), p. 82. Malone writes to Charlemont, Dec. 2, 1788:—'I suppose in the new administration Fox and Lord North will be the secretaries, and Sheridan Chancellor of the Exchequer, for I imagine Lord John Cavendish will hardly think of it again. Burke certainly Paymaster . . . I have this moment heard that Lord John Cavendish will accept his former place and Sheridan be Treasurer of the Navy.'

obvious *tu-quoque*.¹ But it was a remark in an earlier speech which caused most outcry. He warned the Government that they were running a serious risk by denying the Prince's claim to be Regent before any had been made, that such denial might well provoke the claim, till then non-existent.² The Duchess of Devonshire judged this line of argument injudicious, and states that the House took it to be a threat.³ Buckingham writes to Grenville that the speech lost Sheridan many admirers.⁴ It certainly gave Pitt an opportunity which he was not slow to take. 'I have now,' he said, 'an additional reason for asserting the authority of the House and defining the boundaries of right, when the deliberative faculties of Parliament are invaded, and an indecent menace is thrown out to awe and influence our proceedings . . . Men who feel their native freedom will not submit to a threat, however high the authority from which it may come.'⁵ Sheridan's expression was characteristically hasty and impetuous, but once more the line of argument was originally Fox's, who had asserted the Prince's 'right' to the Regency the night before. The Duchess admits that Grey and Sheridan may probably have regretted the introduction of the question of right, but went through with it out of loyalty to Fox.⁶

¹ *Speeches of the Rt. Hon. Richard Brinsley Sheridan*. London, 1815, in five volumes, II, 145.

² *Ibid.*, II, 135.

³ *D. of D. Diary*. *Sichel*, II, 415.

⁴ *Hist. MSS. Com. Dropmore Papers*, I, 388.

⁵ *Parl. History*, XXVII, 730-1.

⁶ *D. of D. Diary*. *Sichel*, II, 414.

But, whatever the outward semblance of unity among the Whigs, behind the scenes were jealousies and quarrels. Burke and Portland were jealous of Sheridan's influence with the Prince.¹ Fox resented his overtures to Thurlow, whom Sheridan rightly preferred to Loughborough as Chancellor in the ministry yet unborn.² Certain it is that the Prince listened far more readily to Sheridan than to any of the others. He praised Sheridan's devotion and skill to the Duchess in person, and swore they should not go unrewarded.³ To Sheridan he expressed his determination to make a clean sweep of the sitting Parliament, both at Westminster and Dublin.⁴ A Regency of only twelve weeks would suffice for the change and seal the doom of Pitt and his officials.⁵

Sheridan's influence culminated in the reply sent by the Prince to Pitt's offer of the Regency. The authorship of the letter is disputed. According to the Duchess' diary, Burke had written one which Sheridan designated 'all fire and tow,' Loughborough another 'all ice and snow,' and Sheridan had to produce a blend of the two. The task was not done till 2 a.m. on Friday, January 2nd, and the letter had to go straight to the Prince, without going first to Fox for inspection as had been arranged, an omission which gave Fox cause for annoyance.⁶ Similarly, Malone writes to Charlemont: 'The Prince's answer to Pitt was written by

¹ *Dropmore Papers*, I, 374.

² *D. of D. Diary*. *Sichel*, II, 414 n, 416-18.

³ *Ibid*, 411.

⁴ *Dropmore Papers*, I, 386.

⁵ *Cornwallis Correspondence*, I, 419.

⁶ *D. of D. Diary*. *Sichel*, II, 421-2.

Sheridan.¹ Dr. Rose refuses to credit Sheridan with the authorship, on the ground of the latter being a joint production,² but this seems a mere quibble, and the Duchess' evidence, besides Mrs. Sheridan's statement that she copied the letter for her husband in the small hours of that Friday morning, supports Mr. Sichel in his belief that the author was, to all intents and purposes, Sheridan.³

But the whole elaborate fabric of hopes and ambitions fell like a card house with the sudden recovery of the King on February 24th, 1789. Sheridan, as ever, bore the disappointment with cheerful resignation. Never again was he so near real power. His long years of opposition, his brief tenure of office in 1806-7, followed by renewed opposition, are stages on the downward road. Pitt had beaten the Foxites because he had at his back the mass of timid respectability, which applauded the Whig extremism in opposition, but trembled to think of it in office. Fox and Sheridan were at this time gaining the reputation for anti-monarchism which was to cling to them all their lives. It needed more discrimination than the English public possessed to distinguish between criticism of the prerogative and desperate Jacobinism. No doubt both

¹ *Charlemont Papers*, 88.

² *William Pitt and the National Revival*, by G. Holland Rose, 421.

³ Cf. *Sichel*, II, 194-5, for further evidence. It should also be noted, as additional proof of Sheridan's authorship, that Burke's draft reads one and a half hours long, while Loughboro's is a mere sketch—a piece of legal grumbling—(both MSS. are available), while Sheridan's, published in full, *Sichel*, II, 393-6, is brief, but complete and dignified.

men exaggerated their theories of liberty into a semblance of republicanism—especially during the war with France—but they could only have gained the confidence of the masses either by a rigid subordination of principles to expediency—and of this Sheridan at least was incapable—or by a whole-hearted conversion to jingoism, which was impossible to them both.

It was nearly a quarter of a century later that a renewal of the Regency problem threw its fatal spell over political circles. Times had changed. Pitt was dead. Fox was dead. In office was a heterogeneous collection of people under Perceval, a strange, incoherent legion who came in [1809] after the Canning-Castlereagh quarrel had split the Portland ministry. The Whigs, as usual, were in opposition. But the Whigs of 1810 differed from the Foxites as sadly as Perceval differed from Pitt. The steely opportunism of Grey and Grenville had none of the reckless eagerness which characterises and endears the men who crowded Devonshire House in 1788. They were as frigid as Pitt, without his compelling personality. Their jealousies were as many as Fox's, but their hearts were cold and they never forgave.

In such strange company was Sheridan, a forlorn, battered figure, genial and impulsive as of old, but aged as much by drink and disappointment as by years. In his business and his home fate had been unkind to him. Disastrous speculation and unscrupulous partners had crippled his resources, and he was no level-headed man of business to set them

on their feet again. More important still, the death of his wife had taken away his good angel.¹ Against the evil genius of the Prince of Wales, Elizabeth Sheridan had striven with all the self-forgetfulness of a noble woman for the soul of her husband. Now she was gone, Sheridan drifted unchecked to his ruin. His second wife was pretty, frivolous and extravagant. Instead of restraining him, she either excited him by playful affection or annoyed him by querulous complaints. It was without a pilot that he entered a political sea for which he was but little suited. The only relic of the old, gay days, he had no place among the calculated intriguers of the new Opposition. Grey, once his friend, had followed ambition, and now flouted Sheridan as the spectre of his dead past. His new-found respectability shrank from the company of his old boon companion, although his conduct towards Sheridan at the very end of his life shows that he still had some affection for his former friend which was temporarily obscured by political rivalry. Grenville had never been on good terms with Sheridan. His natural cold priggishness had kept him apart from Fox in the early days. Only when Addington had replaced Pitt, and the Tory supremacy began to totter, did he seek reconciliation with the Whigs. Not averse to upsetting Addington, he approached Fox with a view to coalition, and Fox, to Sheridan's amazement and disgust, so far forgot his ardent hatred in his eagerness for power, as to accept this unnatural ally. But Grenville never lost sight of his goal. Once he

¹ See Appendix III.

had absorbed some of Fox's popularity, he began to build his own future. Sheridan he tolerated as long as the former seemed worth cultivating. Fox dead, the wary Grenville, now leader of the Whigs, could afford to neglect him, and lost no opportunity of slighting him himself and influencing Grey to do the same.

But Sheridan was to have his revenge, and over the second Regency crisis he gave Grey and Grenville plenteous reason to regret their rudeness. With the Prince of Wales he had never lost touch. The more worthless and undependable the Prince showed himself to be, the more closely did Sheridan cling to him, and now that the King was declared permanently insane, he had every reason to expect his long-delayed reward.

Grenville was not the man to neglect the opportunity offered by the need for a Regent. From the ranks of Pitt's party in 1789 he had watched the plans of the Foxites; but, while appreciating their motive, he had no sympathy with their methods. His policy in 1811 was a curious blend of those of Fox and Pitt in the previous crisis. He meant to instal the Prince as Regent without any discretion beyond that necessary for a change of ministry, and he therefore began at once Pitt's policy of restrictions. Parliament and the People must rule, by which he meant himself and his friends. Grey at first was refractory. He held to Fox's principle of 'right,' and during the passage of the Regency Bill voted against the Government like a true Foxite, while Grenville supported the measure. But Gren-

ville was too strong for him, and soon he was place-grabbing with the rest. These two self-appointed representatives proceeded in January, 1811, to draw up the Prince's reply to the Parliament proposals. The way seemed clear to them. Perceval would go and they would come in and arrange the chess-board as they pleased.

But they had reckoned without Sheridan. There was a Carlton House cabinet nearer the Prince than they, and far from anxious to play their game. Early on in the proceedings Sheridan had written to the Prince, warning him of too close an adhesion to the Whig leaders and urging a definite personal attitude, free from promises of party recognition.¹ The Prince listened; and when Grey and Grenville produced their reply to the Regency Bill proposals, they found Sheridan and Moira had forestalled them. Sheridan's position was a difficult one. He had still an affection for Grey, and longed to detach him from his new friends; but friendship for Grey could not conquer hatred for Grenville, nor could the Prince be induced to see them apart.² There is no need to follow in detail the tortuous intrigues of the following weeks. Sheridan wrote letters for the Regent, revised the compositions of Grenville, and never allowed the Whig lords to gain any ascendancy over the Prince. When the Regent, in full Court, received the address confirming his powers, Sheridan was at his left hand and the baffled Grenville was nowhere. The mortification of Grey and Grenville knew no bounds. Their hopes were dashed, for the

¹ *Moore, II*, 379-382.

² *Sichel, II*, 343 u.

Regent never ceased to revile them and repeat his determination on no account to employ them. Their rage found vent in a remonstrance to the Regent, which contained a spiteful allusion to Sheridan. They are unable to 'suppress the expression of their deep concern in finding that their humble endeavours in your Royal Highness' service have been submitted to the judgment of another person, by whose advice your Royal Highness has been guided in your final decision on a matter in which they alone had, however unworthily, been honoured with your Royal Highness' commands.'¹ This insinuation did nothing but harm. It angered the regent against the authors by the calm assumption of their sole right to control his counsels; and it made him suspicious of Sheridan, as a weak man will be suspicious at any hint that he has acted under influence. The double reaction threw him back on to Perceval. After a series of vain attempts at coalition, the Regent announced that, out of respect to his father's wishes, and with a view to his possible recovery, the ministry would remain unchanged. Sheridan is reported to have behaved very well when this decision was made known, which shattered all his hopes.² This was the supreme act of ingratitude towards his faithful servant on the part of the royal trifier. Sheridan's political career was done. The desultory intrigues which followed Perceval's assassination never seemed likely to result in anything to

¹ *Moore*, II, 99.

² *Creevey Papers*, I, 138-9. For Sheridan's speech on the occasion, see *Hansard*, XVIII, 660.

his advantage, and he must have realised in 1811 that the game was over. He had thrown his last hazard and had lost. A lifetime of tireless devotion had been thrown aside by a selfish debauchee, and yet one more broken figure added to the band of those who, from genuine friendship, from ambition, or from mere vanity, put their trust in princes and courted their own ruin.

There was much in Sheridan's conduct that was not admirable. He was dissipated and often blatant; but he must have credit for his incorruptibility, his good temper, the ideals with which he started; above all, he must have sympathy. Cynics say that sympathy is cheap, but it is often withheld none the less. Sheridan is indeed a man in whom motives are more important than results, but even pitiless analysis of motive is no understanding. For that reason this is no plea for admiration, but most emphatically one for sympathy, for that tolerance which can hear with patience and judge without prejudice.

How can Sheridan's devotion to the Prince be explained? Hostile contemporaries regarded him as a pure opportunist who, having closed every other door against himself, was compelled to haunt Carlton House for want of a better refuge. In the early days of his connection with the Prince he was openly reviled as a secret adviser, as one playing for his own hand alone, and not scrupling to shelter behind royalty in order the more safely to betray his friends, when such a course seemed to his advantage. The Hollands were specially bitter in their denunciations of his influence with the Prince, but

in this, as in everything else, their judgment must not be regarded as anything but thoroughly biased by their eagerness to vindicate and glorify Fox. Sheridan had to defend himself against the charge of corrupt subservience to the Prince.¹ He denied that he either influenced his mind in secret or received presents from him, and fact bears out this last contention. There is evidence of the Prince having made several attempts to confer sinecures and presents on Sheridan, and of their being resisted. The Auditorship of the Duchy of Cornwall he did accept at a moment of great stress, but received no immediate benefit from it because the faithless George had previously promised it to somebody else, who drew the stipend till death.² When at last the money did begin to reach Sheridan, it was, by his special request, transferred to his son. To attribute such transference to anything but unselfish affection is sheer malice. Had Sheridan been the man to take such means of eluding his creditors—an explanation which has been suggested—he would certainly have taken gifts of money from the Prince at other times. But he was not even a borrower. ‘It has been a principle of my life, persevered in through great difficulties,’ he wrote to Whitbread after the burning of his theatre, ‘never to borrow money from private friends, and this resolution I would starve rather than violate; of course, I except the political aid of election subscriptions.’³ He seems also to have excepted tradesmen’s bills, which his own wit taught

¹ *Speeches*, IV, 91, 92. *Sichel*, I, 110 n.

² *Sichel*, II, 320 and note.

³ *Ibid.*, I, 44 seq.

him to evade,¹ even in those frequent cases when he was himself the dupe. His whole method in finance was casual and confiding. His evasions, like his extravagances, were open and direct. He was single-voiced in business as in society.

Such a man was no cool tactician to calculate chances and follow careful policy of personal opportunism. The fervour of his first great political battle threw him on to the Prince's side, and at first the two men were genuine friends. There was much in the Prince's charm and condescension to appeal to Sheridan, and George on his side loved a good companion and a genial wit. During their early connection Sheridan was certainly blind to the worthlessness of his patron, and his devotion was a labour of love, tinged with harmless vanity. But the matter is more difficult when one has to account for his continued support of the Prince. His vision of the liberal monarch, wise and tolerant, must have vanished before the sordid pettiness of the royal rake. One must admit two elements in his conduct. His vanity had grown from the gay conceit of a spoiled child to the defiant obstinacy of a social

¹ An amusing story is told of Sheridan in this connection. One day, while Treasurer to the Navy in the Ministry of all the Talents, he met in Park Lane one of his creditors, from whom he had procured the horse on which he was riding. The dealer, who was also riding, thought that by calling Sheridan's attention to his own mount, he might tactfully pass on to the question of his bill. He therefore said he hoped His Honour liked the horse he had bought, and that he could also recommend the nag he was then riding. 'Let me see,' said Sheridan, 'upon my word, a nice little animal enough, and I dare swear an excellent trotter. Pray let me see his paces up the street.' 'By all means, your Honour.' So up the street trotted the simple dealer, and down the street trotted Sheridan, and so escaped possible importunity.

pariah. As friend after friend left him, as he became more and more of an outcast, he clung the more closely to the showy friendship of Carlton House, where no questions were asked, and where the debauched Regent tolerated anyone who would do his dirty work or drink a glass of wine with him. The isolation of Sheridan's later life must have been more hateful to his buoyant genial soul than it is easy to imagine. Is it strange that he should hold to the one connection which remained to him, and try to forget that he was a mere hanger-on, in his satisfaction at thwarting Grenville or boasting of his intimacy with the Prince's affairs?

Sheridan was not born an intriguer. Disaster made him one. He never intended, as did Fox and Grenville, to use the Prince as a stick to beat the King or the Government, and by holding the stick himself to have the real power. He was no leader. His aim was much more to get the Prince genuine authority and stay at his elbow—unofficially if need be—with suggestion and intimacy. He grew to prefer pulling the wires to strutting on the stage. Charges of place-hunting made against him are palpably ridiculous. Office *quâ* office had little attraction for him, but, on the other hand, neglect cut him to the quick. He had no ambition to be the central figure, but he could not bear the thought of not being in the picture at all.

It is thus in his relations with the Prince. At first Carlton House seemed the most likely field for his talents. Later on it became the only one open to him. The stand he had once chosen from many had

in the end no alternative. He must cling to the Prince or disappear, and Sheridan could not face disappearance. His vanity conquered his pride, and he lingered on, a crippled, ridiculous, but pathetic figure, till royal ingratitude cut the final foothold from under his feet, and he slipped from sight to bankruptcy and death.

II.

THAT the events of Sheridan's life can be found for the most part in the story of his connection with the Prince of Wales, but that, at the same time, this connection reveals little of his own political creed, argues a curious separation between the two. It is easy to realise that his whole career seemed a riddle to his contemporaries. Gillray well expresses the popular attitude in his caricature of Sheridan as a masked Harlequin, dancing with Fox, Mrs. Fitzherbert, and other prominent Whigs before the Prince enthroned as an Eastern monarch.¹ Most of Sheridan's actions had, in the judgment of the period, the roguish caprice of a prancing harlequin. It is easier to-day to understand the man himself, and to substitute for harlequin, pierrot.² Sheridan lived more by impulsive whimsicality than by extravagant cunning. An idea pleased him, and he went to any lengths in its advocacy, frequently to find that in his unreflecting eagerness he had contradicted some former theory, alienated former supporters.

But, at the same time, he held throughout his life unflinchingly to certain principles, seeming to shut them off entirely from passing intrigues or tem-

¹ For a more detailed account of Sheridan as he appears in contemporary satire and caricature, see Appendix I.

² Cf. *Sichel*, I, 92-101.

porary animosities, and these principles form his political belief.

Judged by them he presents the remarkable spectacle of a modern Radical living in the eighteenth century. He shared up to a point the views of the anti-militarist of to-day;¹ he upheld from first to last the freedom of the press;² he urged the abolition of slavery,³ the emancipation of Catholic Ireland;⁴ he opposed Pitt's Act of Union, on the ground that Home Rule was the form of government best suited to the country, and deplored all coercion of the Irish by the English Parliament;⁵ he dared to challenge the prerogative of the king, even to hint at the undesirability of royalty as an institution;⁶ he applauded the French Revolution as a blow for liberty and as the destroyer of a foul despotism;⁷ he never failed to attack the policy of war with revolutionary France, both before it was declared and during its continuance;⁸ he was prominent in every agitation for Parliamentary reform;⁹ his

¹ *Speeches*, I, 6-7, 15-16, 198-202; II, 12, 22, 30; III, 284, 389; V, 21, 247.

² *Ibid.*, II, 355; IV, 207, 406-7, 461 seq. Also cf. *Dropmore Papers*, VII, 76, 78.

³ *Ibid.*, II, 291; V, 328.

⁴ See below, pp. 32-3.

⁵ *Speeches*, V, 17, 26, 29, 31, 32, 34, 36, 38-9, 42-3, 57, 63-4, 67, 92, 238. Also cf. *Ibid.*, I, 32, 163, 167, 172-8, 307-8. Also *Rutland MSS.*, III, 208, 231; *Smith MSS.* (H.M.C.), 345-6. Also below p. 39.

⁶ *Speeches*, III, 140, 143-5, 286, 287; IV, 132; V, 19, 178. Also cf. *Ibid.*, IV, 156-163.

⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 242-5; III, 184-222 (speech in answer to Lord Mornington, Jan., 1794); III, 12-16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, III, 40-1, 46-8, 62-72, 74, 410, 378-9, 405, 407.

⁹ *Ibid.*, I, 54; III, 28, 30-1, 34-5, 75-6, 153-6, 158-9, 163, 166-7; IV, 410-11, 414, 417. Also for case of Scottish Boroughs, cf. *Ibid.*, I, 390; II, 128-9, 205, 209-14, 348-56; III, 1-5, 6-12, 16-26, 27.

attacks on the Penal Laws show a humanitarian spirit rare at the time;¹ he designated the Corn Laws as a tyranny of the rich over the poor;² he urged moderation in the provisions of the Aliens Bill.³

Being a thorough sentimentalist, much of his attitude was dictated by a vague, philosophical hatred of oppression and a love of change for its own sake. Though not going quite as far as Rolle on the other side, who declared he would oppose any change just because it was a change, Sheridan had an avowed belief in the healthiness of continual reform. 'Of late it has become the fashion to decry everything in the nature of reform. . . . Opinions are entertained that reform leads to innovation, innovation to revolution, revolution to anarchy and disorder; and therefore a door shall not be opened to reform. . . . It is the best part of our constitution that it contains a principle of reform in its very nature. . . . Indeed, it is a bad compliment to the constitution to say it is a building which we cannot touch without danger of its overthrow.'⁴ Such sentiments would cause little surprise nowadays, but at the time they were uttered they were regarded as inflammatory, almost anarchistic.⁵

¹ *Speeches*, II, 189, 303; IV, 151, 427.

² *Ibid.*, I, 103-4; IV, 268.

³ *Ibid.*, III, 277.

⁴ *Ibid.*, III, 12-16.

⁵ It is interesting to compare these words of Sheridan with the following remarks of Joseph Priestley: 'All civil societies, and the whole science of government on which they are founded, are yet in their infancy. Like other arts and sciences they are gradually improving, but they improve more slowly, because opportunities for making experiments are fewer. . . . Taking it for granted

His love of liberty had the abstract enthusiasm which possessed revolutionary France. He would have found it difficult to say what he meant by 'liberty' in anything but a negative sense. It was sufficient for him that tyrannies and corruption stood between England and this vague elysium, and he devoted himself to their destruction.

His share in the trial of Warren Hastings, the most brilliant episode in his career, was dictated entirely by this comprehensive hatred of oppression. He had no personal interest in the issue. Indeed, he probably cared very little whether Hastings himself was crushed or his Indian victims compensated.¹ The ex-governor stood charged with cruelty and fraud, the East India Company was known to be corrupt, and behind the whole question lowered the menace of George III with his threat of personal government. The Whigs, therefore, and Sheridan among them, seized the opportunity to make an example of Warren Hastings, to win a victory for freedom and, in the persons of those shadowy Indian

that our constitution and our laws have not escaped the imperfections which we see to be incident to everything human . . . let their excellencies and defects be thoroughly laid open, and let improvements of every kind be made, but not such as would prevent all further improvements; because it is not probable that any improvements which the utmost sagacity of man could suggest, would be an equivalent for the prevention of all that might be made hereafter. Were the best formed State in the world to be fixed in its present condition, I make no doubt that in a course of time it would become the very worst.' (*An Essay on a Course of Liberal Education*, 1765, pp. 161-2.) Priestley lodged with the Linleys at Bath in 1771. There is every likelihood that Sheridan made his acquaintance there, and was influenced in his later attitude by Priestley's opinions.

¹ *Sichel*, II, 38 and note.

victims, to glorify the cause of subject against ruler. Ultimately their action should serve as a warning to the king.

The details of the case are here immaterial. Sheridan undertook to introduce the fourth charge of the impeachment—the spoliation of the Begums of Oude—and his speeches, both in the House of Commons and later in Westminster Hall during the impeachment itself, were the supreme achievements of a supreme orator. Of their value as rhetoric more will be said later. As statements of a political case they show clear arrangement and ready mastery of fact, but they can no more be accepted as a trustworthy presentation of the circumstances than can Burke's speech on the preceding charge. Sheridan, like Burke, got his material from Philip Francis, who was nothing if not prejudiced, having returned from India with the malignant intention of ruining Hastings, whom he hated.¹ Probably Sheridan went to little trouble to verify Francis' information. As has been said, the rights or wrongs of the details meant comparatively little to him beside the great cause of freedom. Certainly he and Burke can be blamed for using a polluted source from whence to draw their information, but the Whig party must be blamed with them. Hastings came to hand as a suitable victim on whom the Radical party could vent their loathing of oppression. In the heat of battle they set their general principle above accuracy of fact. They can be completely absolved from personal spite against Hastings. The pity is that their

¹ *Sichel, II*, 38 and note.

arguments should have been provided by one whose hostility to the ex-governor was prompted by no other motive.

It is impossible to dismiss as mere sentimentality one article of Sheridan's creed—the need for Catholic Emancipation. This he advocated through thick and thin, and the question played an important part in his relations with the Prince of Wales and with Pitt. In 1794, in a speech in the House, he attacked the law which forbade Papists to serve in the English army. The government were employing a hired Catholic army to fight their battles abroad; they allowed some indulgences in Ireland; why this wanton inconsistency?¹ The complaint is renewed in 1796.² Two years later, on the rejection of his own bill for removing disabilities from Catholic soldiers, he made a fierce attack on the government policy in Ireland, ridiculing the attempt to keep Ireland against the will of the people. The cry of 'No Popery' is 'the watchword of folly and faction,' 'an act of political profligacy.'³ In 1880 Pitt was personally assailed for his Monastic Institutions Bill,⁴ for his insincerity, the double-dealing of Lord Fitzwilliam, the system of Catholic exclusion, which is the weakness of English rule in Ireland. He never let Pitt alone, and his exposure of the government's broken pledges in 1807 turned the minister pale with mortification.⁵ Side by side with Grattan, Sheridan insisted on Catholic Relief.⁶ The half-hearted

¹ *Speeches*, III, 370-4.

² *Ibid.*, IV, 283.

³ *Ibid.*, V, 79, 82, 84. Also *Sichel*, II, 282.

⁴ *Ibid.*, V, 155.

⁵ *Ibid.*, V, 354.

⁶ *Speeches*, V, 354, 364.

measure which killed 'All the Talents' he spurned as worse than useless.¹

He did himself great material harm by this perseverance. Throughout the Grey-Grenville intrigues to come to an understanding with the Prince ran the question of Catholic Emancipation. George implored Sheridan to abandon the cause, or at least to shelve it for a time, but Sheridan insisted that it should stand first on the programme of a Regency ministry. Rather than suffer for his servant's obstinacy, the Prince threw him over.

As for Pitt, he trembled before Sheridan's attacks. He considered him a more formidable opponent than Fox.² From the moment of the famous retort about Ben Jonson's *Alchemist*,³ Pitt regarded him with mingled hatred and respect, and Sheridan returned the feeling. 'Detesting the dog as I do,' he wrote in 1803, 'I cannot withhold this just tribute to the scoundrel's talents. I could not help often lamenting in the course of his harangue [Pitt had just been defending the war] what a pity it is that he has not a particle of honesty in him. He would be a great treasure if he had a grain.'⁴ It is to the credit of both that, with all their enmity, Sheridan was never jealous of Pitt's success nor Pitt contemptuous of Sheridan's failure.

The parallel between Sheridan and the modern Radical cannot be proved indefinitely. His humanitarianism, with its hatred of war, shows no trace of

¹ *Sichel*, II, 323-4

² *Moore's Journals*.

³ See below, p. 51.

⁴ *Sichel*, II, 440-1.

internationalism or, as it is sometimes styled, anti-patriotism. There are signs of this doctrine in Fox, who resented Sheridan's disagreement as treachery to the cause of freedom. But though one might well expect to find some such tendency in Sheridan, charges of anarchism and lack of patriotism made against him are quite unjustifiable.¹ He refused to join the bitter condemnation of the National Assembly as detestable regicides,² to respond to the call of the allies for England to help in their extirpation;² he paid an admiring tribute to Bonaparte's powers as general and his courtesy in negotiation;³ but he was among the first to denounce the monster menace of the new military France,⁴ to demand immediate and desperate resistance to any French invasion.⁵ He impressed upon Chauvelin in person the folly of France counting on help from the English Jacobins in an attack on England.⁶ In the same spirit he was prominent in declaring the mutiny in the Nore fleet in 1797 to be unjustifiable and unpatriotic, considering the national danger. While Fox supported the seamen in their mutiny, Sheridan, who had always been the sailors' friend,⁷ helped the ministry in their task of suppression.⁸

¹ *Droghmore Papers*, VII, 180. *Speeches*, IV, 418; I, 247-8; II, 197; V, 213.

² *Speeches*, II, 242-5; III, 44, 134-7, 147.

³ *Ibid.*, V, 136-8, 163-5. Also cf. *Ibid.*, V, 213-15, 226.

⁴ *Ibid.*, IV, 468-9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, III, 40-1; IV, 278, 475; V, 211.

⁶ *William Pitt and the Great War*, by J. Holland Rose, 87.

⁷ *Speeches*, IV, 402, 425, 427. Also Lord Holland's *Memoirs of the Whig Party*, I, 95, 96.

⁸ Rose, 318.

His opponents did not believe in his sincerity, but concluded that because he ridiculed the scares of growing sedition,¹ his determination to resist invasion was either unreal or an unworthy attempt to curry favour with ministers.² Similarly the French, who had welcomed his defence of the revolution,³ could not understand his new attitude, and charged him with apostasy. In this, as in so much else, he fell between two stools, too French for the English, too English for the French.⁴ Sheridan's attitude towards France is bound up with the history of his relations with Fox and Burke. During the long opposition to the French war he fought side by side with the former, and over his estimate of the French Revolution he quarrelled with the latter.

In their hatred of the war with France, Fox and Sheridan were practically at one; indeed, it is almost the only department of their relations in which there is little trace of mutual irritation. They seconded each other's motions again and again during that trying time. Together they faced the inevitable un-

¹ *Speeches*, III, 82, 86, 111 seq.

² *Broadley MSS. Thelwall to Hardy*, 1798.

³ *Dropmore Papers*, I, 608.

⁴ The relations of Fox and Sheridan with the revolutionary party in France are somewhat obscure; but it is certain that the latter counted on help from the English Jacobins in their campaign against the English monarchy. Fox lied when he denied the toasting of himself and Sheridan at White's in Paris in 1792, and Sheridan assented in the lie (*Speeches*, III, 68). But Sheridan and the rest of the Whig aristocrats shrank from an attack on the King and Queen. Hence French disappointment. But there is some likelihood that cordial relations existed between the more advanced Whigs and the French Jacobins at this early date, which gave the latter cause to look for help later on. The details of Sheridan's attitude towards France, with the distinct volte face, are given in Appendix II, q. v.

popularity of men who oppose a national war, however wantonly unjust. Together they incurred charges of unpatriotism for hampering the ministry in a national crisis with queries and revelations of an embarrassing character. Usually their attacks were just enough. They denounced interference in the affairs of another country as impertinent. They cried out against the sloth of the allies, the insatiable greed of the Emperor for subsidy after subsidy, the minute result produced by their payment. They demanded accounts of expenditure, the recognition of the French Republic as a diplomatic unit, overtures of peace. Occasionally they blundered, as when in 1792 Fox moved that an embassy be sent to treat with the French government, whereas Pitt's overtures had already been heard and rejected by Marat, or when Sheridan foolishly termed the Quiberon expedition a deliberate plan of the government to cause the death of the French royalists, although Pitt did all he could for the expedition, and Tallien was entirely responsible for the massacre. On the question of Bonaparte they differed. Sheridan, as has been seen, favoured staunch resistance, but Fox vacillated and continued to play with his policy of peace at any price. In their denunciation of the Peace of Amiens they were in agreement once more.

Right or wrong, the two Whig leaders worked well together, and unanimity on so large a question shows how trivial were those other disagreements which marred and finally split their friendship. At the root of the trouble was Fox's belief in himself as a party leader and Sheridan's conflicting love of

independence. As early as 1771 Sheridan ran counter to Fox on the Gaming Laws and the Marriage Act,¹ the second of which occasions roused his leader to angry reply. The intrigues of the first Regency crisis gave further cause for mutual jealousy and disagreement.² In 1797 Sheridan condemned Fox's peevish secession. The great leader was tired of opposition; attempts at an understanding with Pitt had failed more than once; even an alliance with Lansdowne had been tried, but in vain;³ in sulky despair Fox withdrew to St. Anne's, angry with Tierney for his continued attendance at the House, with Sheridan for asserting the right to please himself. Lord Holland describes Sheridan as torn between hatred of Tierney and a wish to get rid of Fox and occupy his seat as member for Westminster,⁴ but a letter of Sheridan's to his wife, expressing a dread of returning to power, proves this Holland contention to be as untrustworthy as the rest.⁵

Over the Act of Union the breach widened. Sheridan demanded complete separation. Ireland had been a 'job' for English ministers long enough; let her have a fair chance; the union would be a violation of the right of independent legislation.⁶ Fox, in the midst of classical studies, wrote to Grey his preference for federalism as against either union or complete separation.⁷ By 1802 he and Sheridan

¹ *Speeches*, I, 19, 20.

² See above, p. 17.

³ *Fox's Letters*, III, 112.

⁴ *Memoirs of the Whig Party*, I, 90.

⁵ *Sichel*, II, 280.

⁶ *Speeches*, V, 31-9, 67, and cf. above p. 29.

⁷ *Fox's Letters*, III, 150.

were almost at enmity. Fox continually complains behind Sheridan's back of his levity, unreliability and intrigues.¹ On one occasion he hints that Sheridan is lost to them, but that the loss is negligible.² He is not alone in charging Sheridan with treachery and defection. In 1804 Creevey describes the latter's attempts to discredit his late leader and the failure of those attempts. He adds that Sheridan seemed inclined to 'creep back again' when he could get no better reward for his treachery than the friendship of Addington.³ Two years later we hear from the same source that by his continued absence from the House, Sheridan is endangering the majority of the Ministry of All the Talents.⁴ But of all those who denounce Sheridan for bad faith towards Fox, none are so vehement as the Hollands. They quote a letter written to Lord Holland in 1830 by Lord John Townshend, which speaks of Sheridan's influence over Fox, of his double-dealing over the Fox-North coalition, of his general untrustworthiness.⁵ In 1793 the negotiations between Pitt and Fox are said to have broken down because the latter refused to abandon Sheridan, which step was insisted on by Pitt as a necessary condition to alliance.⁶

¹ *Fox's Letters*, III, 206, 388, 420-1, 436-7; IV, 11.

² *Ibid.*, IV, 429-30.

³ *Creevey Papers*, I, 21-2. Also I, 25-6. ⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 195.

⁵ *Fox's Letters*, II, 23-4. But see also *Speeches*, I, 83, and *Sichel*, II, 29, 30 and *note*, where Townshend's contention that Sheridan's greed for office forced Fox into the coalition, is substantially proved to be false.

⁶ *Memoirs of the Whig Party*, I, 31, 2. This charge is also proved to be false, *Sichel*, II, 232—where the real reason for the failure of negotiation is given—namely, that Fox insisted on Pitt giving up the Treasury to Fitzwilliam. Cf. also *Russell, Life of Fox*, II, 289, and *Sichel*, I, 39, 40.

Finally, the favourite charge is constantly repeated that Sheridan aimed at Fox's seat for Westminster. It is striking to notice the same accusation revived by Brougham—himself a would-be candidate—during Sheridan's fight for the seat in 1814.¹

Of Sheridan's private attitude to Fox there is little evidence. In one of his rare letters (probably written in 1802) he praises his leader's speech on the need for peace with France as 'full of prudence and management—qualities he has not always at command.'² Truly the pot calling the kettle black!

But there is another side to the question. Had he been of a vindictive nature and cared to accumulate grievances, Sheridan would have had plenty of occasion to hate Fox, who treated him throughout with persistent bad faith. One striking instance may be given. When the Fox-North coalition went out of office Fox promised Sheridan a post of Cabinet rank if ever the Whigs came back. In 1789, when a Whig ministry seemed imminent, Sheridan, as has been seen, himself refused an important post which Fox apparently was willing for him to have. But the entry of All the Talents saw Sheridan thrown aside after long years of prominence in Opposition. He wrote to Fox and remonstrated, quoting the promise of Cabinet rank, and Fox did not deny the promise or offer to keep his word. Such a desertion, added to great disparity of temper, broke down a friendship which, had it lasted, might have been of inestimable value both to England and to the two men themselves.

¹ *Creevey Papers*, I, 195.

² *Sichel*, II, 440.

The quarrel with Burke is quite a different story. Instead of mutual irritation gradually undermining, a sudden violent breach shattered the friendship. Till 1790 the two men were on good terms, Sheridan holding Burke in great veneration,¹ but occasionally weary of his grandiloquence and fearful of his indiscretion.² But in February of that year Sheridan made a speech commending the aims of the French Revolution and praising its leaders. Burke rose and solemnly stated that henceforth he and Sheridan were separated in politics, the French Revolution standing in his opinion for all that was most horrible in anarchy.³ The cleavage soon became a heated quarrel, Sheridan upbraiding Burke frequently for his hostility to the new French Republic. His most virulent attack was in February, 1793, when, count by count, he disposed of Burke's argument against the Whig amendment to Pitt's war motion. 'We are styled by the honourable gentleman a phalanx. . . who have been endeavouring to make up for the smallness of their numbers by the contrariety of their opinions. An odd description of a phalanx! He knows well that a phalanx, whatever it's extent, must consist of an united band animated by one soul. . . . The next object of his sarcasm was my right honourable friend's (Fox) complaining of being so often misrepresented. . . . The honourable gentleman has only mistaken his own facility in perverting for his antagonist's difficulty in explaining'⁴ . . .

¹ *Burke's Letters*, edited by Fitzwilliam, III, 11. 4 vols, London, 1844.

² *D. of D. Diary, Sichel, II, 404.*

³ *Sheridan's Speeches, II, 242-6.*

⁴ *Ibid., III, 62-70.*

and so on. To Burke's statement of a recent increase of French power, Sheridan replied that the conception of France as an eternal menace was false. He charged Burke with desiring to restore a despotism.

The quarrel grew more angry. In March, 1793, Sheridan openly blamed Burke for panic-stricken desertion of the Opposition for the shelter of the ministerial gaberdine.¹ In private he is said to have remarked: 'It is a pity that he whom we drummed out as a deserter should be lurking within our lines as a spy.' Lord Holland, who relates the anecdote, proceeds to whitewash Fox by attributing to Sheridan the breach between Burke and his old leader.² Sheridan and Burke never came together again. On both sides tempers were lost, but though Sheridan's bitterness is unpleasant reading, it is hard not to prefer a quarrel as open and honest as this to the jealousies and misunderstandings which separated him from Fox, and which were less the fault of the two principals than of the over-zealous guardians of the latter's reputation.

¹ *Sheridan's Speeches*, III, 85.

² *Memoirs of the Whig Party*, I, 11.

III.

NEGLECTED as a politician, slandered as a man, Sheridan nevertheless received as a speaker full, perhaps excessive recognition. In an age of oratory and among a society of orators, his supremacy was almost universally acknowledged. The time when opinion could be swayed by eloquence had not then passed away. It was a frequent event for men of both parties to shed tears at the expression of some moving sentiment. Grief and joy lay nearer the surface then than to-day; audiences were less critical. For playing on the emotions of his hearers Sheridan was eminently qualified. He had a pleasant voice and a command of easy gesture. He passed rapidly from grave to gay, now stirring the House by the recital of oppression, now delighting them with his ridicule, now lashing them with his irony. He seems to have entered Parliament with a reputation for eloquence, for his maiden-speech, a bald protest against a charge of corruption in his election for Stafford, was listened to with unusual attention. His progress was watched. In June, 1783, Horace Walpole writes in his diary: 'Sheridan is improving daily in speaking . . . and always brings the House into good humour with the ministers.' The geniality of his temper continued infectious, and even the disappointments of his later years never embittered him in debate. Ill-natured and contemptuous things

were frequently said of him, but the energy with which he met the taunts was never irritable, although his sarcasms, for all their good-humoured exterior, often stung deeper than he realised and made him enemies he did not suspect. Pitt, Fox, Dundas, by losing their tempers, offended on occasions against restraint and good taste; never Sheridan, who had more bad fortune to bear, more slanders to combat than any of them.

In sheer power of oratory he is even more remarkable. The enthusiasm at the close of his great speech during the trial of Warren Hastings knew no bounds. Shouts, sobs, clapping of hands greeted his closing sentence, and while, with unnecessary theatricality, he sank exhausted into Burke's arms, Westminster Hall rang with the applause at an oration which even Pitt acknowledged to surpass 'all the eloquence of ancient and modern times' and to possess 'everything that genius or art could furnish to agitate and control the human mind.' Fox was equally fulsome: 'All that I have ever heard, all that I have ever read, when compared with it, dwindled into nothing and vanished like vapour before the sun.' Burke declared it to be 'the most astonishing effort of eloquence, argument and wit united, of which there is any record or tradition.' Such praise, even when the necessary allowance is made for eighteenth century extravagance, proves Sheridan's capacity for swaying his audience and happily combining substance and form.¹

¹ Defective reporting has lost to the world the actual words of this great speech. But Mr. Sichel has discovered a version, more

But not only on great occasions does Sheridan stand supreme as an orator. Throughout his Parliamentary career, often on points in themselves of small importance, his speeches are worthy of notice, though he excelled, generally speaking, in attack rather than in defence. There are passages in the speech delivered in December, 1802, on the Army Estimates and the French War, which surpass even the famous trial speech in directness and vigour; witness the estimate of Bonaparte, the fierce attack on ministerial shuffling, the description of the menacing power of France, the repudiation of Pitt as England's only saviour. 'Mr. Pitt the only man to save the country! No single man can save the country. If a nation depends only upon one man it cannot, and, I will add, does not deserve to be saved; it can only be done by the Parliament and the people.'¹ Fox lamented this speech, which did not happen to tally with his intrigues; but, judged as eloquence alone, it is worthy of the highest admiration.

A comparison of the oratory of Sheridan and Burke suggests itself at once as interesting and valuable, and such a comparison will show that while

trustworthy than any hitherto known, of the first speech on the Begums of Oude, delivered in the House of Commons, Feb. 7, 1787. Though probably the oration in Westminster Hall was an even finer effort, this former one is remarkable in that, at its conclusion, voting was postponed to allow the feelings of the audience, stirred to wild enthusiasm by Sheridan's eloquence, to subside and make calm judgment possible. Its perusal, therefore, will give a very fair idea of the longer and more powerful speech which followed. Long extracts are given in *Sichel*, II, 131-141.

¹ *Speeches*, V, 222.

Burke was the deeper thinker, Sheridan excelled as a speaker. Nor will this inferiority of Burke be found to be a mere matter of harsh voice and unprepossessing address, as against the charm and ease of Sheridan's manner. It lies even more in the difference of style and attitude. Burke never approached a political question without indulging in philosophical reflection and debate, without treating of his point as a general truth and supporting his argument with weighty reasoning and sometimes fanciful imagery.¹ Sheridan, on the other hand, had in a superlative degree the qualities of a debater—a mind keen to seize upon the weaknesses of the other side and to dispose of their arguments, a faculty for a clear and rapid statement of his own contention, a wit which, though at times it strikes us as rather commonplace, is never ponderous, and, at his best, a fine sense of the proper proportion of argument to declamation, of noun to epithet, of fact to metaphor. It is true that he was incapable of much of Burke's thought and breadth of view, though the ideas of posterity have shown that Sheridan was, of the two, in many cases the more prophetic. He had little constructive power, whereas Burke had the suggestive grandeur of a true statesman. Burke remains a permanent force in political thought; this Sheridan could never be. A policy of emotional impulse cannot be for all time, and

¹ Cf. defence of Rockingham and the appeal for American freedom in the Speech on American Taxation (167, 173-4), or the description of the attitude of colonies to mother-country in the appeal for conciliation with America (203). (The references are to the edition of *Burke's Works*, edited by Rogers, Vol. I, London, 1842.)

Sheridan's philosophy was more a philosophy of impulse and instinct than of reason. His idealism was the flight of a bird; Burke's, the building of a temple: his the irony, the flash of steel; Burke's a breaking wave. Sheridan sought not to overwhelm by cumulative force of reasoning, but to shatter by the vigour of attack, to maim by a sudden thrust.

Another consideration worthy of notice is this. Between Burke's speeches and written work appears no great difference of style.¹ His oratory must have given the impression of reading aloud by rote. With Sheridan the two styles are quite apart. He realised that words heard make their effect by different means to words read. How far his speeches were prepared is doubtful. Certainly he used copious and careful notes, for otherwise he could not so clearly have arranged and summarized his points. But it is unlikely that he ever prepared the actual language used, or, if he did, ever kept to his original phrasing, while Burke's periods bear the unmistakable stamp of having been written beforehand. It is the difference between natural and prepared epigram, between spontaneous eloquence and literary facility.

Contemporary judgment in this case is more interesting than important, as it must necessarily have been dictated largely by the attraction or otherwise of actual delivery. Burke cannot fairly be blamed for his natural disadvantages, but nevertheless, that

¹ Cf. *Speeches on America and the Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs.*

no complaints of Sheridan's dullness¹ appear among the torrent of abuse created by his unpopular views and merciless irony, while his great rival, who for long enough represented the feelings of the majority, earned the nickname of the 'dinner-bell' by his talent for clearing the house, is a testimony to Sheridan's greater power over his hearers which cannot be wholly neglected.

It must not be imagined, however, that Sheridan was never inflated in his oratory. He had his grandiloquent moments of over-charged imagery; these, hailed as 'elegant fancy' by his hearers, jar on us, accustomed as we are to speeches which imply rather than declaim, which condense rather than enlarge. 'Should a stranger survey the land formerly Sujah Dowlah's, and seek the cause of its calamity—should he ask what monstrous madness had ravaged thus with widespread war, what desolating foreign foe, what disputed succession, what religious zeal, what fabled monster has stalked abroad, and, with malice and mortal enmity to man, has withered with the grip of death every growth of nature and humanity . . . the answer will be, if any answer dare be given. No, alas! . . . this damp of death is the mere effusion of British amity; we smile under the pressure of their support, we writhe under the grip of their pestiferous alliance!' ² In the Zenana the Begums were 'enshrined rather than immured! . . .

¹ Cf. Appendix I, p. 67, for description of a caricature ridiculing Sheridan for the staleness of his wit and scurrility of his abuse. I have seen no other attack on Sheridan's oratory, either serious or comic.

² 1788. *Speeches*, II, 88.

Such was their sense of delicacy that to them the sight of man was pollution, and the piety of the nation rendered their residence a sanctuary! ' ¹ ' It is not idle pomp or tawdry magnificence which entitles members of a volunteer association to the confidence of their country. In this great and trying crisis we are to look for salvation to fortitude, to heroism, to contempt of death! ' ²

It is safe to say that when Sheridan talked like this he was not doing himself justice. ' Ages are all equal; but genius is always above the age '—and Sheridan's ' periods ' are a descent to the mean level of his time. It is a commonplace to applaud his plays and speeches as full of the modern spirit, to praise their author as ' before his time,' because they can to-day be seen and read without the fact obtruding that they belong to another century. Such praise does not grasp the fact that genius is full of the spirit of all time, that the great works of art, written, spoken, painted or composed, are not ' before their time,' but are above all time. Aeschylus, Demosthenes, Duccio, Chaucer, Dante, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Beethoven— all the giants of art, belong to a great company which overstep the bonds of time and race and belong to every age. Art of any kind which bears an ineradicable stamp of century or nationality lacks one essential of greatness, and that Sheridan, as an orator, has won the applause not only of his own day but of each succeeding generation, not only of his own race but of many others, is his claim to be

¹ 1788. *Speeches*, II, 64.

² 1803. *Speeches*, V, 243.

considered, in his special sphere, as one of the giants.

After such a conclusion it may seem idle to attempt to analyse in any detail Sheridan's methods or style, but the light they throw on his career makes them worthy at any rate of brief consideration. Much of his wit, so universally admired by his contemporaries, seems rather laboured to-day. It bears, in fact, the eighteenth century stamp, and can therefore be no real element in his greatness. Humour depends too much on an ever-changing sense of the comic to become great art. Caricature is necessarily transitory, because it is topical. Rabelais cannot really satisfy us to-day, and the eighteenth century was in many respects curiously Rabelaisian. Shakespeare's humour often seems crude and forced. Even modern wit is subject to national and individual differences. How many English people enjoy Mark Twain as do the Americans? So with Sheridan. His definition of the rebellion in Oude as 'raised by two old women, headed by two eunuchs, and quelled by an affidavit' leaves us grave. His picture of the Speaker deprived of his state and coming to the House 'on foot, covered with a warm surtout and honoured with the privilege of an umbrella in case of rain,' reported as greeted by 'loud bursts of laughter,' would not greatly move a modern House of Commons. In the matter of retort, however, he can please us better. His good-humoured answer to Pitt's unworthy gibe at his theatrical connection is well-known: 'Flattered and encouraged by the right hon. gentleman's panegyric on my talents, if

ever I again engage in the compositions he alludes to, I may be tempted to an act of presumption, to attempt an improvement on one of Ben Jonson's best characters, the character of the Angry Boy in the *Alchemist*.'¹ The story is equally delightful—told many years later—of the carman Patterson, who had on his cart the names of Patterson and Pitt, and who, when asked what he meant by the name of Pitt on his cart, seeing that he had no partner and that Pitt had therefore no share in the business, replied: 'Ah! if he has no share in the business, he has a large share in the profit.'

Sheridan's humour is keen and restrained when compared with that of his contemporaries. Gillray and Rowlandson represent the popular idea of humour—and that was, as has been said, Rabelaisian. Pitt's speeches were cold and haughty. Burke indulged occasionally in ponderous satire of the kind which reveals the point long before it actually arrives. Fox was seldom humorous. Sheridan's jests, therefore, may well have seemed refreshing and been hailed with relief in the desert of heavy debate.

On the other hand, while it gained him ready hearers, his wit was a cause for mistrust. The slow eighteenth century mind was suspicious of Sheridan's volatile quickness. Such readiness was considered the mark of a charlatan, of one who lived by his tongue, whose only quality was a turn for sarcasm. Pitt was only voicing a general feeling when he regretted that such 'dramatic turns and epigram-

¹ *Speeches*, I, 47.

matic points' were not 'kept to their proper stage.' Few of those who flocked to Sheridan's plays would have admitted his fitness to govern. Parliament listened to his taunts with an amused smile or with feelings of personal resentment. They seldom considered his attacks as serious political argument. Even his friends, who had welcomed the glitter of his early speeches, grew suspicious and, not understanding, condemned him as vain, foolish and insincere. Fox most of all: 'Sheridan's levities are sometimes disgusting,' he wrote to Grey. They thought him incapable of taking anything seriously, not realising that irony may be the expression of deep conviction, that a smiling face may mask a burning brain.

It is undeniable that Sheridan's quick tongue and ready eloquence sometimes carried him beyond the limits of expediency and exaggerated the impression of unreliability. He had a genuine and right aversion to unthinking party loyalty, but there were times when he allowed his love of independence to defeat its own object, and obtruded general principles at the expense of immediate policy. Fox's complaints, though ungrateful, are partly justified. 'Sheridan's speech gave more concern to his friends and satisfaction to his enemies than any he ever made,' he wrote in 1802.¹ And again in the following year: 'Sheridan has outdone his usual outdoings. Folly beyond all the past. But what degree of folly will not extreme levity and vanity be capable of producing.'²

¹ Fox, *Letters*, III 388.

² *Ibid.*, IV, 11.

But Fox's annoyance was largely the anger of a would-be party leader towards a recalcitrant follower, and it is difficult not to sympathise with Sheridan, for all his imprudences, in his love of independence and individual freedom. By the side of Burke's thundered periods, of Fox's passionate invective, of Pitt's Parnassian grandeur, it is understandable that Sheridan should have seemed whimsical, and so have earned his reputation for insincerity. But one cannot read his speeches and not feel that behind all their humour and variety lie convictions sincerely, if not deeply, felt and sternly defended.

The justice or otherwise of the charge of insincerity so often made against him will be discussed shortly. All that is in question here is his power as an orator, and for this everyone must feel a thorough admiration. It remains to show how little this talent helped him, how indeed it tended to prejudice men against him and so thickened the gloom which shrouded the close of his career.

IV.

FEW great men have started their political life under fairer auspices than did Sheridan. Few have perished more miserably. It is possible that the beginning was too easy. Instead of a laborious Parliamentary apprenticeship, Sheridan encountered immediate welcome and attention. He had made his name as a playwright and a wit. The Whigs hailed him as an invaluable recruit, and he came, almost at once, to share with Burke and Fox the outward leadership of the party. Such a brilliant *début* would have turned more balanced heads than his. His exuberant vanity saw a triumphant vista of political glory, of a grateful country receiving from his hands and from those of Fox the benefits of liberty, which meant so much to him.

The outcome was quite otherwise. Opposition, bravely undertaken as an eager fight to be fought and won, became a hopeless never-ending struggle. Two brief tenures of office were the only result of thirty years' warfare, and when Whiggism seemed at last to have turned the corner, it was no longer the Whiggism Sheridan knew and loved.

Why did he fail? Why, of all the crowd of politicians and statesmen, so few of them his

equals in talent or industry, does he present the most pitiable spectacle of a wasted career? 'Poor dear Sherry!' wrote Byron. 'What a wreck is that man! And all from bad pilotage, for no one had ever better gales tho' now and then a little too squally.'¹ 'Bad pilotage' is an ambiguous phrase. It may refer to the deadening influence of drink, or to mistaken friendship and policy, or to wilful waste of opportunity. In a sense all are true charges. Sheridan lost edge by giving way to drink. He had not the stolid strength of Walpole, to drink to continual excess and feel no ill-effects. His nervous, excitable temperament fell apart, and each drunken orgy, though drowning the misery of the moment, left him less compact, less able to gauge the dangers on his way. The disastrous folly of his connection with the Prince of Wales has been sufficiently dwelt on. No department of his life was free from the baneful influence of this unhappy friendship. It absorbed his energies, warped his outlook, prejudiced his contemporaries. It herded him with toadies and place-hunters and earned him a reputation like theirs, a reputation which in some respects he grew to deserve. He was confounded with the profligate side of the Prince's life. He was thought to pander to the royal debauchee, to provide amusements for the vitiated tastes of his patron. The injustice of this estimate cannot lessen its importance in his life. His reputation for

¹ Byron, *Letters and Journals*, II, 320. Also cf. *Ibid.*, 397. 'I hate to see the old ones lose, particularly Sheridan, for all his méchanceté.'

debauchery and immorality was widespread,¹ and has only recently been disputed. Instigated by his enemies and uncombated by erstwhile friends like Grey, the general contempt expressed for him had all the blind spite of jealous ignorance, but at the same time it made his political hopes and ambitions vain from the start.

Had he been a different type of man he might fairly be charged with wasting his opportunities. But, as has been said, he was emphatically no opportunist. He had innumerable chances, in his early years especially, of rising to official eminence at the sacrifice of some principle or the abandonment of some cause. But these he steadily refused. He had set before himself an ideal of independence and championship of liberty, and stars and ribbons could not tempt him from his self-appointed duty. In the sense that he never stooped to barter his honour for titles, as he might easily have done, he certainly threw away a lifetime of opportunities; but to blame him for so doing shows a curious standard of judgment.

Still there are other reasons for his failure than those suggested in Byron's phrase. Sheridan seems never to have succeeded in inspiring confidence. Even the Duchess of Devonshire hints at this:

¹ The Prince himself did not scruple to join the slanderers. In after years he said of Sheridan to Croker: 'He took to live in a very low way, and all he looked for in the company he kept was brandy and water. He lived a good deal with some low acquaintance he had made—a harness-maker, I forget his name—but he had a house near Leatherhead.' The friend alluded to was a Mr. Iremonger—certainly no harness-maker! Cf. *Sichel*, II, 372-3.

‘Sheridan not only gave convincing evidence of his talents, but at the same time evinced the danger of his character. I do not mean to accuse him of any duplicity, he has stood the test of even poverty, and I feel convinced of the honour of his political sentiments—but he cannot resist playing a sly game.’¹ But persons less kindly disposed did not hesitate to accuse him of insincerity in all he did and said, and professed themselves unable to trust him in anything. In such criticism there is more than a little of the natural jealousy of the awkward for the easy-mannered, of the inarticulate for the fluent. Sheridan’s very talents damaged him. He was too quick, too adaptable for the slow tastes of his contemporaries, too enthusiastic in an age which distrusted enthusiasm. Men were suspicious of his easy address and invariable geniality, regarding them as proofs of insincerity. Probably Sheridan’s friendly nature and love of company tempted him in the smaller matters of social intercourse to self-contradiction, and the little shallownesses of after-dinner talk were magnified by malice and stupidity into a general reputation for unreliability.² It is also undeniable

¹ *D. of D. Diary. Sichel, II, 400.* Lady Holland makes an interesting remark about Sheridan in somewhat the same connection :—‘About him (Sheridan) my reason and impulse always are at variance. Reflection convinces me he ought to be despised for his private life and doubted for his political, but whenever I see him, if but for five minutes, a sort of cheerful frankness and pleasant wittiness puts to flight all ye reasonable prejudices that I entertained against him.’ (*The Journal of Elizabeth, Lady Holland, I, 255.*)

² Dr. Rose considers him ‘too caustic and volatile to be anything but a frondeur in men’s eyes . . . the Charles O’Malley of politics.’ (*Wm. Pitt and the National Revival, 263.*)

that the sharpness of his tongue made him many enemies, who were glad enough to give him the bad name behind his back which they dared not utter to his face.¹ So, while his mercurial temperament prevented people taking him seriously, his talent for retort and satire made him feared and hated.

Perhaps this general distrust can also be explained by the point of view from which he approached politics. As has been said, he served no Parliamentary apprenticeship, and lack of experience stood in his way throughout his career. He tried to fight the battle of Parliament with those weapons which had won him the theatre and society. He treated the House as he had treated his audiences at Drury Lane. But where brilliant rhetoric served in the latter case, it was insufficient in the former. The theatre crowds shouted for more. The hard-headed Tories asked for facts, and on receiving instead wit and eloquence, smiled, shrugged, and turned away.² Sheridan seems never to have understood the reason of their dissatisfaction.

But there was another obstacle yet to his success. His contemporaries, friendly or hostile, all agree in terming him vain, and to vanity many of his indiscretions may certainly be attributed. He could not resist the fascination of being behind the scenes, and of hinting in public at his superior knowledge of such an intrigue, of his intimacy with such a great

¹ Even Fox shrank from his friend's sarcasm. He wrote to Grey in 1799:—'Sheridan seems fuller of absurd notions than ever man was, only do not say I say so.' (Fox, *Letters*, III, 293-4.)

² Cf. the Mrs. Fitzherbert incident.

personage. Perhaps his high standard of honour was partly preserved by this same vanity. It delighted him to vaunt his incorruptibility, to recount the chances of wealth and favour which for principle's sake he had let pass.¹ His integrity was on a high level compared to that of his contemporaries,² but, while honouring him for it, one cannot help regretting the parade he made of it, and his readiness to pose as a martyr, as a lamb among wolves.

Whimsicality, a sharp tongue, and vanity are therefore three elements in Sheridan's failure as a politician. A fourth is his lack of birth, and chronic penury. Family was essential in eighteenth century Whiggery, and Sheridan had no family. An aristocrat by nature, he was despised by the aristocrats by descent with whom he worked. Grenville, with the soul of a shopkeeper, ranked higher than Sheridan by virtue of his pedigree. It was indeed an age of snobbery when Creevey could write to his wife that 'Burke, Sheridan and Dunning were considered as not elevated enough in rank to be admitted as Cabinet ministers.'³ Ordinary rank and a reputation for wasteful poverty stamped him as a charlatan in eighteenth century eyes. Men saw in his every action either an attempt to raise himself,

¹ An excellent example of the unnecessary display which his vanity impelled him to make, is his action previous to his second marriage. Rather than let his bride's father realise his poverty, and outdo him in generosity, he tied up in a marriage-settlement not only the capital, but also the income of a £12,000, which must have been literally all he possessed at the time. By this extraordinary act £40,000 had accumulated in 1813, which, in his sore need, he could not touch. (Cf. *Sichel*, I, 44 and note.)

² *Sichel*, I, 39 seq.

³ *Creevey Papers*, I, 162.

to pose as one of the aristocracy, or a plan for getting more money to spend on his low pleasures.¹

A further and even less creditable reason for the damaging influence of Sheridan's poverty was that political success in those days could be bought more easily than deserved. One has only to glance at the election expenses of any Member of Parliament of the period to see that the goodwill of the honest burgesses was not beyond purchase. Any man whose capacity for largesse was known to be limited stood from the first at a serious disadvantage. So while some men distrusted Sheridan as a parasite, as one who sponged on the great and the wealthy, whose talents were ever at the service of the highest bidder, others spurned him as one from whom little but abstract gratitude could be expected.

By such treatment he was forced into defiance, by undeserved neglect and the studied insults of petty enemies, and though he kept his wit and his liveliness to the end, it is a soured and ruined out-cast whom we see, prematurely aged, stumbling from ledges greased with official smugness and princely ingratitude, clutching at every withered branch, at every tuft of grass, in the vain attempt to stay his downward course.

One anecdote shows that among his earlier friends at least was loyalty. In the last year of his life he was taken by Lord Essex to Drury Lane to see

¹ Cf. *Journal of Elizabeth, Lady Holland, I*, p. 222 :—' I have malignity enough in my disposition not to feel much sympathy for his (Sheridan's) afflictions. . . . His defenders (and their number is but slender) say that all his bad conduct has proceeded from his struggling against the meanness of his origin and the littleness of his means, &c., &c.

Kean, the new actor. In one of the intervals he slipped away, and was discovered in the green room enthroned among an enthusiastic company of actors and critics, of whom Byron was one. They were drinking his health, who was once monarch of Drury Lane.¹ But there are few such bright spots to relieve the gloom of his isolation. While the humbler companions of his early life toasted him in love and admiration, the mighty turned away to greet the latest victim of their fatal favour.

And so he fell, snared by his own brilliance, trusting to balance alone to keep him on his eminence, scorning the aid of stick or helping hand. Once he slipped, there were plenty to drive him downwards with insult and calumny, few to stop his tragic decline. Sheridan and his failure can point a moral—the hopelessness of a struggle between one brilliant man and a horde, stupid but obstinate. He may also adorn a tale—a black adornment of a black record—the record of King George the Fourth.

¹ *Sichell*, II, 376. Also *Moore and Eg. MSS.*, 1975, f. 213.

[THE END.]

APPENDIX I.

SHERIDAN AS HE APPEARS IN CONTEMPORARY
CARICATURE AND SATIRE.

THE eighteenth century was, par excellence, the age of social and political satire, both drawn and written. The pamphlets, broadsheets and caricatures mocking the foibles of the great knew no bounds of decency or respect, and continued to increase throughout the century, till no public character, man or woman, could hope to escape their attentions.

For such attacks Sheridan presented an ideal target. He was poor, and poverty is always comic. He had few powerful friends, and therefore could not easily retaliate even on the most scurrilous libels. Behind his later social prominence lay a theatrical past, which gave scope for all the stock jests of the green-room satirist. His reputation for extravagance, his love of drink, made him an easy and popular butt. His solitary idealism, not being understood, was considered unmeaning, and he himself labelled an unsuccessful, place-hunting charlatan. Finally, he belonged to a party which was generally in a minority and always unpopular, and so in yet another way was good game, for scurrility cannot flourish unless it attacks the enemies of established convention.

It must be added that Sheridan himself derived more amusement than annoyance from the sallies of his critics. He could rely on his own wit to give as good as he got, and frequently had the satisfaction of turning the tables on his assailants.

In political caricature he may almost be regarded as the property of Gillray. The two men were close contemporaries, and Gillray, far more than Rowlandson, satirised those political events in which Sheridan played a part. It was Gillray who created the Sheridan-type in caricature which was generally adopted, the loose-mouthed figure with pimpled cheeks and ruby nose.

The trial of Warren Hastings marks Sheridan's first appearance. He is usually depicted as helping Fox and Burke to ruin the ex-governor and so destroy British prestige in India; Gillray draws him as one of the pack of the 'Westminster Hunt' pursuing Hastings into the Treasury, where Pitt and Dundas stand sentry. A very rare cut of Woodward's shows Hastings led to the scaffold in a tumbril drawn by Sheridan and others, while Burke walks by the side in the garb of a Jesuit priest. In these, as in the caricatures at the time of the Revolutionary War, the Whigs meet with the same cheap taunts as greeted Pro-Boers and Little Englanders during the South African War.

Sheridan appears more prominently at the time of the first Regency crisis. In 1791 Gillray published *Bandelures*, which represents the Prince lounging on a sofa, his head on Mrs. Fitzherbert's lap, while Sheridan, standing behind the lady, imprints a kiss

on her cheek. Underneath are these lines by Blackmore:—

‘—thus sits the Dupe content!
Pleases himself with toys, thinks Heav’n secure,
Depends on woman’s smiles, and thinks the man
His soul is wrapped in can be nought but true.

‘Fond fool, arouse! shake off thy childish dream;
Behold Love’s falsehood, Friendship’s perjur’d truth;
Nor sit and sleep for all around the world
Thy shame is known, while thou alone art blind.’

The drawing mentioned above (see p. 28) of the Whigs dancing before the Prince, belongs to the same date.

But the period of the French Revolution and the war with England provides the largest number of caricatures of Sheridan. He and Fox appear again and again in the guise of revolutionaries, planning to murder the King and establish a republic with French aid. In December, 1792, a fine drawing of Gillray appeared, called ‘The Dagger Scene, or the Plot Discovered.’ Burke, standing in the House of Commons, throws down a bloody dagger and denounces the policy of alliance with France. ‘Nineteen assassins are already here, who, aided and abetted by wretches who do not believe in a God, are preparing to scour the filth from your streets with the Blood of all who are Virtuous and Honourable!’ Fox and Sheridan shrink together discomfited, the latter exclaiming: ‘Charley, Charley, farewell to all our hopes of levelling monarchs! farewell to all hopes of paying off my debts by a general Bankruptcy! farewell to all hopes of Plunder! in

the moment of victory we are trapped and undone!' Another caricature of the same date or a little earlier is entitled 'The Impeachment, or the Father of the Gang turned King's Evidence,' and shows Burke appealing to Justice against Fox and Sheridan, with the words: 'Behold the abettors of Revolution!'

Gillray alone published hundreds of caricatures during this period—attacks on the Whig Club, on Thomas Paine, on the French sympathies of the Opposition; representations of the results of French methods in English politics; honour to Pitt for guiding the ship of state between the Scylla of Democracy (a rock crowned with a cap of liberty) and the Charybdis of Despotic Power (a crown-shaped whirlpool) to the Haven of Public Happiness; pictures of the Whigs bartering their country for gold to France, or shooting at a target shaped like King George III. In all of those Sheridan supports Fox, who is usually the central figure.

But the next stage shows them separated. Sheridan has now taken a patriotic line against Bonaparte, and is immediately burlesqued as an insincere poseur. In 1803 he is an alarmist bill-sticker seeking to frighten John Bull:—

'A Corsican thief has just slipped from his quarters
And is coming to ravish your wives and your daughters!'

In another large drawing—'The Patriotic Courage of Sherry Andrew and a Peep through the Fog'—Sheridan, in a tattered harlequin dress, brandishing a lath-sword, shouts defiance to the oncoming French fleet: 'Let 'em come, damme! Where are

the French Buggaboos! Single-handed, I'll beat forty of them! Damme, I'll pay 'em like renter shares, mulct 'em out of their benefits and come the Drury Lane slang over them!' Fox, turning away, gazes into a thick fog and cannot see the invaders, a reference to his continued demands for peace with France. It is interesting to note that while Gillray shared the unreasoning hatred of Bonaparte and the insane jingoism which possessed the whole nation at the time, he could not accept Sheridan's change of tone as anything but a theatrical attitude, struck for the sake of effect.

The Ministry of All the Talents called forth a storm of abuse and ridicule from the caricaturists. The new ministers are shown hastily changing their republican blue for ministerial buff, some thrusting the discarded garments under chairs, others strutting in their uniforms, Fox shaving his gunpowder muzzle, Sheridan rejoicing at the acquisition of a new shirt. In another print the scramble for office is burlesqued. 'More Pigs than Teats' shows a litter of hungry little pigs crowding round their mother-sow, while Johnny Bull looks over the wall and laments that the old sow will be drained dry. The extravagance of their short ministry and their ill-assorted legions are also subjects of frequent caricatures. They often figure as the minions of Bonaparte, *e.g.* 'Westminster Conscripts under the Training Act' and 'Tiddy Doll or the Great French Gingerbread Maker.' Their fall gives Gillray cause for rejoicing, and he draws them once more as the herd of pigs driven out of the yard by Farmer George

and rushing down a bank into the sea ('The Broad-Bottomed Litter running into the Sea of Perdition'). Canning wrote a spirited ode on the fall of All the Talents, which well expresses the tone of Tory prejudice:—

'When the Broad-Bottomed Junto all nonsense and strife
Resigned with a groan its political life;
When converted to Rome and of honesty tired
It to Satan gave back what himself had inspired,
The demon of Faction that over them hung,
In accents of anguish their epitaph sung;
While Pride and Venality joined in the stave
And canting Democracy wept on the grave.
Here lies in the tomb that we hollowed for Pitt,
The conscience of Grenville, of Temple the wit;
Of Sidmouth the firmness, the temper of Grey,
And Treasurer Sheridan's promise to pay.

.

'Then huzza for the party that's here laid to rest—
"All the Talents"—but self-praising blockheads at best;
Though they sleep in oblivion, they've died with the hope,
At the last last day of freedom to rise with the Pope.'¹

Where possible, Gillray always drew Sheridan either holding a bottle or appropriating someone else's money, while his ragged clothes show his poverty. He is also shown cringing for office or trying to climb by back ways to Olympus. One interesting caricature reflects on his oratory. Pitt is 'Uncorking old Sherry,' and as he draws the cork there escapes a volley of abuse, lies, slanders and stale jests, meant as a commentary on Sheridan's style of speaking.

So altogether there are few evils of which Sheridan is not accused, but one very important exception

¹ An allusion to the efforts made by the ministry towards Catholic Emancipation.

must be noticed. He is never represented as loose with women. That such is the case in an age when sexual license was the caricaturists' dearest opportunity, when political opponents, far less hated than Sheridan by Gillray, were depicted in every situation obscenity could suggest, is proof positive that in this at least Sheridan was restrained.¹ The other charges have been dealt with in the main essay.

The satires—letters, pamphlets, poems—pick out the same foibles for ridicule. His love of drink, his poverty, his debts, his republicanism, his insincerity, his theatricality, are the aspects of Sheridan chiefly emphasised. The majority are hostile. Indeed, I have been able to find only one which treats him with favour (*The Struggles of Sheridan*. London, 1790), and it is possible that this may conceal some irony which at this distance cannot be certainly detected.

Of the others, here is an *Epigram on Mr. Sheridan's probable method of 'liquidating' his debts*:—

'Dick, pay your debts!' a fellow roars one day,
 'I will,' replies this limb of legislature.
 'Then tell me, Dick, what debt you first will pay?'
 'Why, first I'll pay—I'll pay the debt of nature!'

In a ballad of November, 1794, Fox and his friends are urged to abandon politics and go into the

¹ I do not mean by this to deny to Sheridan occasional gallantries. He is once shown overwhelmed with a mass of bills and love-letters. Mrs. Sheridan's letters (see Appendix III) give intimate details of his lapse in 1791. But it is none the less possible to claim for Sheridan in this matter a morality above the average of his time, a superiority due partly to his natural chivalry, partly to the influence of the wife he loved.

Church. Fox, the preacher, shall occupy the pulpit; North shall officiate as clerk, while—

‘ To comic Richard, ever true,
Be it assigned the curs to lash;
With ready hand to ope the pew
With ready hand to take the cash.’

A long, satirical poem of 1795, entitled *The Political Dramatist of the House of Commons*, describes Sheridan in his seat in Parliament:—

‘ Before him in confusion’s order lie
Codes and digests of direst anarchy,
With all the embryo forms of varied strife
Rough-sketched by Gallic pencils from the life.’

He broods over his schemes of French alliance, ponders his debts and how to evade them till, falling asleep, the ghosts of anarchists and murderers haunt him with such horrid gestures that he wakes in terror and rushes out to seek comfort in the bottle.

The Whig Club, and the English Jacobins generally, are the subjects of satires too numerous to mention, all harping on similar points. As a final quotation, an extract from *All the Talents, a Poem in three dialogues* (London, 1807), by Polypus¹, shall give the popular idea of Sheridan as expressed by an unvindictive enemy. Scriblerus is enumerating the members of the Broad-Bottomed Administration, and trying to say a good word for each, but Polypus disposes one by one of their claims to esteem. They come to Sheridan:—

Scriblerus: Now long live Sh-r-d-n. A nobler soul
Heav’n never formed since worlds began to roll

Polypus: Fix’d thoughts on Sh-r-d-n ’tis vain to seek,
Who from himself is varying every week;

THE POLITICAL CAREER OF

And picturing like a cloud at close of day
 Fantastic features never at a stay.

.

To grasp this Proteus were to cork in jars
 The fleeting rainbows and the falling stars,
 Now calm he lives and careless to be great ;
 Now deep in plots and blustering in debate.
 Now drinking, rhiming, dicing, pass his day,
 And now he plans a peace and now a play.
 A magic wand of eloquence assumes,
 Or sweeps up jests and brandishes his brooms ;
 A giant sputtering pappy from the spoon,
 A mighty trifler and a safe buffoon,
 With too much wit to harbour common-sense ;
 With too much spirit even to spare expense ;
 To tradesman, jockey, porter, Jack and Jill
 He pays his court, but never pays his bill.
 By fitful turns in sense and folly sunk,
 Divinely eloquent or beastly drunk ;
 A splendid wreck of talents misapplied,
 By sloth he loses what he gains by pride.
 Him mean, great, silly, wise, alike we call ;
 The pride, the shame, the boast, the scorn of all !

¹ E. Stannard-Barrett.

APPENDIX II.

SHERIDAN'S CHANGE OF ATTITUDE DURING THE WAR
WITH FRANCE.

IT is not possible wholly to reconcile Sheridan's early pacificism with his later warlike ardour against Bonaparte. A rather fuller summary than was possible above¹ of his chief pronouncements on the French war and the Government policy towards France will reveal a distinct and important change of attitude.

In 1790 he answered Burke's attack on the French Revolution, defending the overthrow of the monarchy as a safeguard to England, and as having removed a Government which dealt with other nations without faith or loyalty, and on lines of 'unprincipled ambition.'² In 1794 he blamed Pitt and his party for goading France into mad resistance, and then execrating her as forcing war on England.³ It is in 1798 that there are signs of a change of tone, and he speaks of the new republic as a growing danger, but it must be noted that he adds: 'Were France now again monarchical instead of republican, we should equally have to watch and dread her ambitions and encroachments.'⁴ French aggression is not the result of the republican

¹ See above, pp. 35-6.

³ *Speeches*, III, 186-7.

² *Speeches*, II, 242-5.

⁴ *Speeches*, IV, 469.

régime, but of new-found predominance. In February, 1800, he spoke of Bonaparte as a friend of peace, and declared peace to be his personal interest;¹ and a few months later: 'Bonaparte's army is only sufficient to guard his own republic, not to menace the world.'² But late in 1802 he said that the French had everything to gain by an invasion of England, because they had nothing to lose; they were even resorting to the old economic policy of heavy taxes and prohibitions.³

This obvious inconsistency can partly be accounted for by Sheridan's incautious rhetoric.. He was constantly seduced by his own fluency into saying things he did not really mean. Some of his slighter self-contradictions may be entirely attributed to this verbal rashness, but in this case there is something more—a definite change of attitude. To charge him with an attempt to curry favour with Pitt is absurd. His denunciations of the ministry remain unabated. Probably, as he grew older, the defiant attitude of youth lost some of its charm, and his love of unconventionality lessened, till he adopted, naturally enough, a patriotic role, falling even into jingoism on more than one occasion.

But there is another and a more important explanation. He did not foresee that the logical development of his early beliefs was anti-patriotism, that what at one stage expressed his true conviction, at the next showed him in a totally false light. He was by nature a patriot. But by nature equally he

¹ *Speeches*, V, 136, 138.

² *Speeches*, V, 213, 215.

³ *Speeches*, V, 163-5.

felt the sentimental appeal of the cause of liberty. Liberty, when it took the form of unwarrantable aggression, not only became a new tyranny, but ran counter to his love of country, and he, while unable to realise the tyranny of the Terror, revolted at the pretensions of Bonaparte. Being himself a tangle of conflicting emotions, it was inevitable that his actions should sometimes share this incongruity.

This point has been dwelt on here, not out of any respect for the overrated virtue of consistency, but because Sheridan's change of tone has been made the pretext for wild charges of apostasy and flunkeyism, which imply an insincerity of which he was incapable.

APPENDIX III.

SOME UNPUBLISHED LETTERS OF MRS. SHERIDAN TO
MRS. CANNING.

THE matter which follows was not included in the Essay which won the Stanhope Prize, as unfortunately I did not come across these letters till some months after the award. The kindness of their owner, to whom I have expressed my gratitude elsewhere, enables me to print them here in the form of an appendix. They are of greater personal than political value, but for the light they throw on Sheridan, and as evidence of the charm of the writer, I am very glad to have the opportunity of including them. The late Mr. Butler lent the letters to Mr. Fraser Rae, to use in compiling his 'Life of Sheridan,' but I can find only one passage quoted there and that from a letter I have not used. Mr. Sichel, I believe, did not see them. In a recently published book, *The Linleys of Bath*, no mention of them is made.

Mrs. Stratford Canning, *née* Patrick, was Mrs. Sheridan's dearest friend in the later years of her life. Tom Sheridan and George Canning, whom Mrs. Canning brought up as her own son, were school friends. To Mrs. Canning, Mrs. Sheridan turned for peace and relief from the bustle of a London life she hated. Politics hardly appear in

the letters, except as a burden to be thrown off when possible. There can be no doubting the absolute sincerity of Mrs. Sheridan's confidences to her friend, for theirs was an intimacy which required no concealments, which, indeed, derived its strength from complete mutual frankness.

I have not printed all the letters in the collection. About half of them are concerned with purely domestic matters, and though interesting as revealing the quiet beauty of Mrs. Sheridan's tastes, would be out of place in an essay on Sheridan as a politician. But the references to Sheridan, creditable and otherwise, have been transcribed verbatim.

To no one letter is the date of the year attached. These I have added where possible from internal evidence, but the results are necessarily conjectural. Where clearness required, I have endeavoured to give the full names of those persons referred to by an initial.

May 7 [1787].

MY DEAR HETTY,

If it is possible for you to spare one half hour, do employ it in telling me how you go on with your Nursery—no news they say must be good and therefore I hope you are both laying in a stock of health and spirits for the enjoyment of your friends, when we meet; but tho' my wishes tempt me to believe this to be the case it will be a greater satisfaction to receive a confirmation of it under your own hand. While you are reposing quietly among your corn-

fields we are all in a Bustle of expectation for the result of the Negotiations carrying on about the Prince. There have been several Conferences held on the subject between Pitt and Dundas. On one side the P.[rince], Sheridan and Ch. Fox, on the other an express was yesterday sent to Windsor to the King, but I have not yet heard what answer has been returned, tho' I know Pitt has been with the Prince this morning. But I have not seen anybody since to hear the news. At any rate it must end well for us for if the K—[ing] now flies off, the question will be brought into the House with greater *éclat* and we shall beat them on it two to one. This they are conscious of and are completely frighten'd. It will likewise most probably produce a breach between Pitt and the K—. In short we are all in high spirits about it. Poor Mrs. F.[itzherbert] is very much to be pittied, and I am glad for the honour of the fine world that they have shewn more good nature and attention to her than perhaps the outrageously virtuous wd. approve. Everybody has been to visit her since the debate in the H. of C. and all people seem anxious to countenance and support her. Her behaviour has been perfectly amiable throughout.

All public Places are now overrun with French People. Madame de Polignac and her daughter, Madame de Guiche, and half a thousand more swarm about you wherever you go. All the fine Ladies give fine suppers to them every night. Tomorrow there is one at Devon.[shire] House, and I am in the agony of being invited—for as the Woman

in the Play says 'I had leavener touch a Toad than those outlandish creturs.'

The thing you see in the Papers of Lady Ann Foley is true. Ld. P. was to have married her in three days, when he caught her writing a letter to Mr. Foley expressing a most earnest desire to live with him as his mistress.

God bless you, my dear Woman, and your good Man; to whom pray give a kind kiss from me. I wish to God it cd. make him well. Pray write me one line—and believe me truly affectly yrs.

E. C. SHERIDAN.

May 19, [1787].

Since I wrote to you last, my dear Hetty, I have been very ill, too ill to receive any letters, consequently yours was not given me till yesterday . . . Your letter was a great comfort to me; I began to fear from your silence that you had no good news to send me of your poor Patient. Thank God this is not the case. The Account you give confirms me in the belief that sunshine and quiet will *patch him up* in all Places.

I have been such a poor creature lately that I know nothing of what is going on in the World. The Princes Business is still unsettled. S.[heridan] has taken great Pains about it and four days ago there was a very exact statement of his Expenses and Establishment sent to the K—— in which it was proved that he could not take back his Household

without an addition to his income of eighteen thousand Pound, with wh. he was ready to give any security that no debts shd. be incurred in future. This Statement was made out so well and the whole thing put in so clear a Light, that everybody thought it must be complied with, especially as the P. had submitted so patiently to all the little dirty mean Examinations into his Pocket Money etc. But after waiting for an answer four days S. and Mr. Gray called here late last night to say they were just sent for to the P., that we were all at sea again, that the K—— had taken exceptions, that he had discover'd that the P's Liveries cost more than his—in short such paltry objections that the P. is quite outrageous, and it is now supposed the whole Business will be brought on again in the H. of C. and that we must unfurl the Flag of Defiance.

So much for Politicks. The Ds [Devonshires] go to-day to Cheltenham and from thence to Bath to join the *Parlez-vous* who are there . . . Mary and her babes are settled at H. Court. She is very poorly indeed and I am very uncomfortable about her. She has never recd. your Letter. I asked S. about it, but poor fellow he has been so frighten'd about me that he says he never open'd a Letter the whole time I was ill . . .

God bless you, my dear Woman. Give my kindest love to poor Stratty and as many kisses as you think he can take with safety.

Yours truly,

E. C. SHERIDAN.

CREWE HALL, *Tuesday 28th*, [?1787].

[Mrs. Sheridan is still unwell, but writes cheerfully to assure Mrs. Canning she will soon be recovered, and that in any case she will at once recognise any 'alarming symptom.']

—'I mention this that you may not be frightened—and I entreat once more that you will depend on me and never let anything tempt you to write to S. for he is too much inclined to frighten himself, poor fellow—.'

CREWE HALL, *Dec. 8th*, [?1787].

[Her continued ill-health prompts Mrs. Sheridan once more to urge Mrs. Canning against betraying any anxiety to Sheridan himself.]

—'I have not said a word of this [*i.e.* a fresh attack of illness] to S., who believes me to be quite well, and I entreat you to be silent on the subject. It would only make him very unhappy, without doing me any good, and I am sure, poor fellow, he does not want any addition to the Vexations and Distresses wh. surround him at present.'

[The letter goes on to discuss a projected settlement in a country house near Chester. Mrs. Sheridan is anxious for that particular district from motives of economy and also from love of her Welsh friends thereabouts. Sheridan himself is favourable, and says 'his presence in town would never be necessary for above three months in the year, and if I [Mrs. Sheridan] was well and able I certainly never meant that he should pass those three months alone in town.'] She goes on:—

‘ I want S. to give up the very expensive House we have in B[ruton] Street to make our country Residence, wherever it is, our *Home* and for the time he is obliged to be in town, to take a ready furnish’d House as you have done. In that case we cd. have afforded to have the Comforts and Conveniences I pant for, in the country, and this at first he consented to—but now, he has convinc’d himself—and when he talks as you know he does he convinces me too—that it is absolutely necessary to keep up his House in town.’

And further on in the same letter : —

‘ S. has sent me such a History of the Lacy’s that it makes my heart bleed to think of it. She is dying in Consumption and in want of the common necessaries of Life. You may be assured S.’s warm Heart has not suffered him to be an unfeeling spectator of their distress. He has sent her a Physician with other Comforts, perhaps more necessary.’

[No date.] [1789.]

—We are all of us in the dumps, ma’am, for I verily believe this tormenting K—— is going to recover in good earnest—.

[*Thursday.*] [1789.]

‘ S. is gone this morning to S. Paul’s in the procession. They say nothing ever equalled the confusion of the city.’

[? Procession of thanksgiving for the King’s recovery.]

Wednesday morn [March 3, 1791].

[The dangers of enclosing letters to S., who never hands them on.]

CREWE HALL, *Jan. 10th, [1791].*

My dearest Hetty will perhaps think it unkind that I have been so long at this seat of hospitable jollity without giving her some accounts of our proceeding . . . I cannot bear you shd. think I neglect you, and therefore I have determined to tell you the real Cause of my silence. It is impossible in a Letter to detail the thousand Causes I have for Vexation, but do not let it make you too unhappy if you hear that S. and I shall most probably come to an amicable separation when I return to town. We have been sometime separated *in fact* as man and wife. The World, my dear Hetty, is a bad one, and we are both Victims of its Seductions. S. has involved himself by his Gallantries and cannot retreat. The Duplicity of his Conduct to me has hurt me more than anything else, and I confess to you that my Heart is entirely alienated from him, and I see no prospect of Happiness for either of us but in the Proposal I have made him of Parting. Do not suppose that I will ever do anything to disgrace myself or my family. The D. of C[larence] (tho' I own to you I am not indifferent to his devoted Attachment for me, and have thought more favourably of him still since I have had reason to make comparisons between his Conduct and S.'s) has nothing to do with this determination, nor does he even

guess my intention. You may rely on the propriety of my Conduct in regard to him for many sakes, but I will in future live by myself and to my own tastes.

Friday morn. [1791.]

MY DEAREST HETTY,

. . . You will not be sorry to hear that I have at last consented to pass an Act of Oblivion over all S's Vagaries, and that we are at present on very comfortable terms. I don't know in my life that ever I passed so many miserable Hours as I did for the last weeks I was at Crewe. S. had so completely involved himself with Lady D——n [Duncannon] that a suit was actually commenced against them in Doctors Commons, and if the D. of Devon. had not come over to England and exerted his influence with Ld. D[uncannon] by this time S. wd have been an object of Ridicule and Abuse to all the World. However, thank God the Business is hush'd up. I believe principally on old Ld. Besborough's account and she is going abroad very soon, I believe to her Sister. You will imagine this affair gave me no little uneasiness, but can you believe it possible that at the very time when S. was pleading for forgiveness from me on this account, before it was certain that it wd. be hush'd up, at the moment almost in wh. he was swearing and imprecating all sorts of Curses on himself on me and his Child, if ever he was led away by any Motive to be false to me again, he threw the whole Family

at Crewe into Confusion and Distress, by playing the fool with Miss Fd. (little Emma's governess) and contriving so awkwardly too, as to be discovered by the whole House, locked up with her in a Bed Chamber in an unfrequented part of the House. I confess to you, my dear Hetty, that this last instance of his duplicity, the apparent total want of all feeling for me, of all sense of Honor, Delicacy, Propriety, considering the *Person*, the *Place*, and the *Time* when he indulged so unwarrantable an inclination, provok'd me so much beyond all bounds, that I am confident had the D. of C. been six and thirty instead of six and twenty, I should have run away with him directly, tho' most probably I shd. have hung myself a Week afterwards. But fortunately the distance between us gave time for reflection, and I only determined to live no longer with S. This was the time when I wrote you the letter wh. I daresay alarmed you. I kept my Resolution a great while and even parted with S. quite unreconciled to him . . . But I don't know how it is. I have been talked over by Mrs. B[?ouverie] Ch. Fox and S. himself has been so terribly frightened and affected by my Behaviour, that at last I have received him once more into favour, tho' I own to you I have lost all Confidence in his professions and promises. However for those dear Creatures who are always brought as strong arguments against any rash step, I shall endeavour if possible to keep him steady to his good Resolutions.'

The letter goes on to describe the importunate passion of the Duke of Clarence, Mrs. Sheridan's

strong inclination to yield to his desires, her final decision to throw off his attentions, the efforts of the Prince of Wales to control his brother, and ends with an expression of thankfulness that the troubles are now over.

[The mention of the Duke of Clarence as twenty six years old shows the date of this letter to be 1791—the Duke being born in 1765. Is it not possible that this is the ‘peccadillo’ referred to elsewhere by Mrs. Sheridan and which Sichel represents as mysterious? (ii. 217).

Lady Duncannon, afterwards Lady Bessborough, was the sister of the Duchess of Devonshire.]

C[REWE] H[OUSE], *Jan. 27th.* [1791.]

MY DEAREST HETTY,

I write a few lines to you before I leave Crewe, as I think it will give you pleasure to hear that Matters are in some sort made up between S. and me . . . S.'s Sorrow . . . for having made me so unhappy, and for having exposed me so often to Temptations and Dangers (wh. God knows how I have hitherto escaped) has made some impression on my Heart, and in short I have been softened into forgiveness, and may yet look forward to domestic Happiness sometime or other, tho' I am convinced, notwithstanding Oaths and Professions, not yet for many Years. We are both now descending the Hill pretty fast, and tho' we take different paths, perhaps we shall meet at the Bottom at last, and then our Wanderings and Deviations may serve for Moral-

ing in our Chimney Corner some twenty years hence.

[The letter concludes with a further description of the persecutions of the Duke of Clarence.]

[? *May 27, 1792.*]

I have and do most solemnly promise my dear friend Mrs. S. to protect and guard her poor child thro' Life and to do my utmost to breed her up like my own. That is saying enough—.

I here solemnly promise my dear Betsey never to interfere on any account with Mrs. C.[anning] in the education or in any other way of my poor child. I cannot write all I wish but he knows my Heart. Swear or I shall not die in peace—.

The above lines were written by Mrs. Sheridan on her deathbed. The handwriting is wavering, the composition confused; the writer is sinking fast. The first paragraph was to be signed by Mrs. Canning, to whom the child was to be confided. The second by Sheridan himself. It will be noticed that in the last two sentences of the second paragraph Mrs. Sheridan's thoughts wander, and she seems to address Sheridan personally.

The existence of this document is mentioned by Rae (ii. 150) and Sichel (ii. 222), but it is not given verbatim by either authority.

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